

Chapter 6

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art at Charles White Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

Since 2007 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has presented exhibitions and related programs at Charles White Elementary School's gallery. These exhibitions present artworks from the museum's collection in innovative ways, support contemporary artists in the creation of new work, and allow LACMA to develop and expand its engagement with audiences in the MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. This unique and unprecedented partnership with students, teachers, families, and community members supports learning goals and strengthens community. Ultimately, the exhibition program shares the museum's collection, creates new and dynamic works of art, engages with audiences, builds community, and educates—in the broadest possible sense—allowing for deeper and more sustained levels of engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Ultimately, where the museum is rooted—who its patrons and audiences are—gives shape, if not to its program, then to its ethical and civic posture. (Kathy Halbreich, Associate Director, The Museum of Modern Art¹)

American Artist and educator Charles White (1918–1979) taught at Otis Art Institute from 1965 until his death. A master draftsman, White is known for his drawings, lithographs, paintings, and murals that eloquently portray the universality of human experiences through portraits of African-Americans. Employed by the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) during the Depression, inspired by the Mexican Muralists, and deeply affected by the civil rights movement, his social consciousness determined

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the spirit of his work both as an artist and a teacher. As Chair of the Drawing Department at Otis, and through his many years of teaching, White influenced generations of artists.

In 1997 Otis Art Institute (which later became Otis College of Art and Design) vacated its longtime location in the MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles for a campus on the western side of the city. At the time, the MacArthur Park neighborhood was known for its high incidence of crime, pervasive drug activity, and violent gangs; the college's move out of the neighborhood was part of a larger movement of organizations and institutions departing MacArthur Park. In 2004 Charles White Elementary School opened its doors on the former Otis campus, and the art school's large professional gallery—previously used to display student and alumni artwork—was left intact.

In the spirit of White's commitment to social change and civic engagement, when the opportunity arose, Los Angeles County Museum of Art staff was excited by the possibility of programming exhibitions at this site. Sharing works from the museum's permanent collection with the community in the school's gallery, while simultaneously providing robust educational programming, offered LACMA the chance to build an audience, grow ties with the MacArthur Park neighborhood, and perhaps help strengthen this community. The museum eagerly embarked on this imaginative and unique collaboration.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with a collection that includes more than 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to present day and representing the geographic globe, is the largest art museum in the western United States. Since its inception in 1965, educational programming has been integral to its mission. In 2006 LACMA launched a new, unprecedented and ambitious initiative to provide a holistic approach to community engagement and arts education. *Art Programs with the Community: LACMA On-Site* supports art programming in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and in other organizations for children and families throughout Los Angeles. Targeting underserved and low-income communities, the initiative provides students and their families with opportunities to create personal relationships with LACMA. The endeavor is made possible by the Anna H. Bing LACMA Trust, an endowment that ensures education and community engagement continue as essential and ongoing functions of the museum.

A signature program of this initiative is the museum's partnership with LAUSD's Charles White Elementary School. Its mission: to create annual exhibitions at the school featuring objects from LACMA's collection alongside newly commissioned work by local, national, and international artists. In addition, a dedicated workshop space inside the gallery engenders an active and dynamic atmosphere. LACMA's programming at Charles White Elementary School thus belongs to a long-standing tradition of service, yet extends it in breadth and depth.

LACMA's work at Charles White Elementary School also perpetuates the more broad museum convention of actively attempting to be open, welcoming, transparent, diverse, and relevant (Hirzy, 1992; Weil, 1999; American Association of Museums, 2002). While the Charles White school gallery has the resources and public dimension of LACMA, it also exists—and is rooted—outside of conventional art venues. Because this gallery is most accessible to children, their families, and communities who are not traditional museum visitors, values and priorities that might not be part of the common art-museum experience are purposefully made integral to its programming.

Approaches to learning are always at the forefront of the Charles White gallery's programming as, after all, it is housed in an elementary school. Exhibitions and workshops can connect directly with curriculum, or can reflect pedagogical approaches more broadly. In addition, the ways in which students learn to become active citizens in their community provide areas for intersections with the exhibitions. MacArthur Park, an area with a rich and important Southern California artistic history, is also a neigh-

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