New director transforms ailing Rose Art Museum

By Geoff Edgers | GLOBE STAFF | NOVEMBER 10, 2013

Christopher Bedford (center), the director of the Rose Art Museum, greeted guests.

WALTHAM — The coffee urns were emptied. No hot water left for tea, either.

Christopher Bedford, the director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University and organizer of the Saturday symposium on Jack Whitten, chuckled as he held an empty cup.

“We’re out of water because we never get so many people,” he said, noting the packed room at the university’s admissions center.
This is exactly what Bedford has been striving for since taking over the Rose last year. The first-time director was hired to revive a sleepy museum bruised by the university’s bungled 2009 attempt to sell off its collection. He has done that, and more, building a staff, board, and exhibition schedule virtually from scratch, acquiring new works, and recruiting a key Boston philanthropist to lead a board of trustees.

Attendance at the Rose has been climbing steadily since his arrival, from 9,145 before he came to 14,303 in the current year. This week, Bedford will announce that he has commissioned renowned artist Chris Burden to install an ambitious, outdoor and permanent work with a $2 million price tag.

“He’s been a spectacular success already here,” said Brandeis president Fred Lawrence, who hired Bedford. “I wanted somebody who had great vision and energy and imagination for taking the Rose in a much more dramatic direction. Somebody viewing this as a place to bring stability and calm was not going to get that done. That’s not Chris.”

Bedford does not mind discussing what he calls the “previous sins” of the institution, but he does not believe there is much left to say about them. In January 2009, Brandeis then-president Jehuda Reinharz announced plans to sell the Rose’s collection, which includes works by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Willem de Kooning and is valued at more than $350 million.

Donors, museum leaders, and prominent art critics savaged Brandeis. The museum’s staff largely exited and artists refused to show their works at the Rose.

In 2011, Lawrence, the newly installed president, settled a lawsuit with a group of Rose supporters demanding the school guarantee no art would be sold and launched a search for a new director. Bedford arrived in September 2012 from the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, where he served as chief curator.
He brought energy and an address book stuffed with the names of some of the contemporary art world’s hottest artists. That included Mark Bradford, the Los Angeles-based abstract artist whose work has been featured recently at the Museum of Fine Arts and Institute of Contemporary Art.

Bradford, now a member of the Rose’s board, recently met Bedford for breakfast to talk about a potential collaboration. During the conversation, the two huddled over Bradford’s iPhone as the artist showed Bedford his latest works.

The first painting Bedford bought for the Rose after taking over was a sprawling mixed-media abstract by Bradford, “Father, You Have Murdered Me.”

“This is one of the frustrations with Mark,” Bedford said, while scrolling through the images. “I thought it was, at the time, the best painting in his studio. Now I see these.”

Bedford is always looking, whether at a New York opening in one of his Lanvin or Burberry suits or in jeans during a studio visit. In fact, it was Bedford’s eye that Lawrence says led to his hiring.

Brandeis’s president likes to tell the story of when Bedford came last year for his job interview. A painting by abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler hung on the wall. Bedford immediately launched into conversation about the piece.

“He starts to talk about it in an extremely erudite way, but what sold me is the way he looked at that picture,” said Lawrence. “I said, ‘I want somebody as the director of my museum who looks at art the way that man is looking at that picture.’ ”

That same enthusiasm eventually persuaded Liz Krupp to join the Rose board. Krupp admits she was reluctant. Already a trustee at the MFA, she has also served on the boards of the American Repertory Theatre and Boston Ballet. She and her husband, George, a real estate investor who cofounded the Berkshire Group, have had a gallery named after them at the MFA.

Not long after Bedford’s hiring, he was invited to meet Liz over lunch by Frederick Lawrence’s wife, Kathy. Krupp initially resisted Bedford’s offer to join the Rose board. She was too busy. Then Bedford e-mailed and called. He and Fred Lawrence visited her at home. She couldn’t say no this time.
“He’s so personable, he’s so suave, and incredibly brilliant,” said Krupp. “I saw a young man who has real fire in his belly, who wants to accept the challenge and believes wholeheartedly in the mission of Brandeis. Looking at him, you just say, ‘poof, let’s put all that history behind us.’”

It is, Bedford admits, the honeymoon period. And he is not about to let it slide by without making the most of the moment.

Since starting at the Rose, Bedford has spent about $600,000 of the $1 million available in the Rose’s annual acquisition fund to acquire Bradford’s 9-by-12-foot collage and commission Walead Beshty to create a mirrored floor at the Rose that crinkles and cracks under the weight of museum visitors. Other acquisitions are coming soon, said Bedford, including works by Whitten, Al Loving, Dor Guez, and Charline von Heyl.

The Burden work is being paid for through a special acquisition fund. It will be installed outside the Rose and feature two dozen century-old cast iron street lamps the artist restored. It is similar to “Urban Light,” which Burden created at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2008.

The purpose of the piece is not just its beauty — the glowing, LACMA site has been featured in films and magazine spreads — but to create a gathering spot outside the Rose. The museum’s front doors currently face a parking circle with a small patch of grass.

“The big message here is to reflect a very outward-facing philosophy toward the campus and the art world,” Bedford said on a recent afternoon in his office, a sketch of the Burden installation tacked to the wall. “So for instance, I could have gone after a Cy Twombly painting that would have filled a hole and I think is a real priority to us. But I thought in my first year, I wanted to shift the needle in a different way and make it apparent to the art world that this Rose was a place to visit.”

Bedford never heard of the Rose growing up. Born in Scotland, he lived there until he was 8 and the family moved to England. At 17, Bedford and his family moved to the United States. His father worked as an executive vice president at Motorola.
In 1997, Bedford enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio, studying art history and playing on the defensive line of the school’s football team — he has shed 40 pounds from his playing weight of 230 — before earning his master’s at Case Western Reserve University.

Ellen Landau, his thesis adviser, said she was struck by Bedford’s writing skills.

“I would say in my 31 years there I have had very few people who really wrote something publishable,” she said.

Bedford regularly published pieces, including reviews and previews for the Cleveland Plain Dealer and an essay on American artist Matthew Barney’s films that won an award.

After earning his master’s degree in 2003, Bedford headed to California, where he worked as assistant curator in the contemporary art department of the Los Angeles County Museum.

That’s where he developed his relationships with Bradford and Burden, among others.

He also met his future wife, Jennifer, an art historian who worked as a senior editor at the Getty Research Institute. They have written together, including a 2009 essay in the art magazine Frieze which analyzed a television advertisement for the Xbox 360 game, Gears of War. The couple have three children and live in Harvard.

Bedford’s move back to Ohio, in 2010, caught Landau’s attention. He became chief curator at the Wexner, organizing shows featuring such artists as Omer Fast and Paul Sietsma. His Mark Bradford exhibition opened at the Wexner in 2010 before traveling to the ICA.

“Rather than taking a job at the Whitney or Museum of Modern Art, he got the opportunity to do a lot, to make his mark,” she said. “Going to the Wexner was a brilliant move.”

Sitting in his office, Bedford reflected on his latest move and his aggressive approach during his first year in Waltham.
“There’s a lot of attention, and expectations are now quite high given what we’ve done, and the challenge is to keep the pitch where it is,” he said. “This is the time for the Rose.”

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