SculptureCenter Steps Out Into the Light

By RANDY KENNEDY

Visiting the SculptureCenter on its dead-end street in Long Island City, Queens, feels like stumbling onto a lesser artist’s studio. The two-story brick building, a former trolley repair shop with the words “Derrick and Hoist Co. Inc.” fading beneath the cornice, has worn its institutional identity so lightly that the center has existed for years as a kind of artist-secret, attracting only 13,000 visitors in 2013, despite being highly regarded by critics and artists. But now, 96 years into one of the stranger vagabond histories of any New York City art institution, the nonprofit center is beginning to look — if not act — more like a museum. On Sunday, it will open its expanded and renovated building to the public, after a 14-month, $4.5 million project that used the raw materials of contemporary sculpture — Cor-Ten steel plates, concrete slab and plywood — to alter subtly the building’s exterior and interior.

The center, at 44-18 Parsons Street, just off Jackson Avenue, will have a new courtyard entrance that leads to its first substantial front desk and a bookshop, across from which visitors will be able to see beyond a floating wall into the cavernous main exhibition space. A roll-up gate that was once the way inside for many of the largest sculptural pieces has been replaced by cast-steel doors that look as if they were conceived by Continued on Page 2

SculptureCenter Ready To Step Out Into Light

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Richard Serra. But most of the building remains defiantly garage-like, down to old ceramic electrical insulators jutting from the basement walls.

“There aren’t plenty of white boxes in New York, and we don’t want to be another one,” said Mary Ceruti, the center’s executive director and chief curator, who added that though the center is only blocks from several subway stops and a five-minute walk from MoMA PS1, it has been a place whose location has long defined when it enters.

“People came here ready to see art because they’ve made the effort, and that’s a good thing,” Ms. Ceruti said. “It’s easy for people to make that effort. You and that’s part of why we did this.”

In some ways, the renovation — while exceedingly modest, compared with those at many other American art institutions — is an indication of the SculptureCenter’s success as a continuous test bed since it opened 15 years ago. Founded in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1998 as the Clay Club, the center soon moved to the West Village and then, in 1993, to a carriage house on the Upper East Side, where it operated a beloved school with artists’ studios.

But in 2001, its board, deciding that the collection was nixed in outdated figurative ideas and was out of touch with contemporary art, decided everything, closing the school and the studios, selling the carriage house and redecorating the center in Queens as a “European-style kasbah,” a noncollaborative institution whose mission was to nurture the work of emerging and underrepresented artists.

The move left anger and disappointment in its wake, but by several measures, the center has found a new momentum, partly on the work of many younger artists who have been given substantial careers, like Mirka Soukupova, a Polish artist with a show of new work at the Hauser & Wirth gallery in Chelsea; Gail Sjostedt; Beth Price; Jessica Johnson; and Raoul Johnson, whose first solo museum show was there.

It sometimes seems that little of the subsequent attention the artists receive is off the center. But by showing each work, it has solidified a reputation as a place where artists can develop somewhat isolated from the growing pressures of the art market.

“Sometimes, even now,” Ms. Ceruti recalled, “I have a trustee who says, ‘Mary, what do you think of this artist?’ And I say, ‘Well, when we showed her five years ago...’ And then I tell the trustee, ‘You were at that show’?”

She added, “We have to find better ways to help people remember what we’ve done.”

Andrew Bernier, whose architecture firm designed the expansion (the initial design in 2002 was by Miguel Linares), said he had sought mostly to create “a seamless process of arrival,” an experience that followed the path of the center’s previous setup, where visitors entered almost unaided into exhibition space.

“The thought was to sit in any way you like, but a character or even remove the move up and insistent edges,” Mr. Bernier said of the space, which grew from 4,000 square feet to 6,000 square feet. “To me, it speaks of a place where things were made, and that’s sort of perfect as an architecture.”

(The exhibition inaugurating the space, “Puddles, pools, par- tials,” organized by the curator Ruha Barak and the artist

After 86 years, an art world secret is renovated to become more of a museum.

Camille Henrot will be a characteristic eccentric groupshow exploration of 20th-century industrial space, using the art of Saul Steinberg and the 2002 movie “Who Framed Roger Rabbit?” as unlikely compatriots.

The project — half of its cost was provided by the city, and the rest by private donors — will make the center more approachable, as the neighborhood around it is rapidly transforming from industrial to residential. Not so long ago, the neighbors were a vacant lot and an auto shop; a nearby lumberyard used to lend its forklift for moving sculptures. Now the center is flanked by two tall, shiny new condominium buildings, and there are rumors that a boutique hotel is coming in the block.

“It’s not the Wild West anymore,” Ms. Ceruti said. “There’s a kind of, ‘We can’t do anything we want, make the noise we want, the way we used to feel in the last five years. But the flip side is that people are much more comfortable coming here now. They know people who live here.”