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Akron Art Museum's gala to 'Defy Gravity'

Opening of building to include big party, first look at galleries

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About 1,500 people are expected to converge at High and Market streets in downtown Akron the evening of July 7.

They'll be attending the sold-out "Defy Gravity" gala to celebrate the opening of the Akron Art Museum's major expansion. "Defy Gravity" is a nod to the new winglike roof that hovers over the museum's old section.

Joan Lauck, the museum's development director, spoke with the Beacon Journal about the gala, the museum's opening and other happenings:

A: Yes. We wanted to bring 1,000 people into the museum for the gala. I think Mitchell (Kahan, the art museum director) in his mind had a number... to be something big... Sandy Johnston (who is chairing the gala committee) and the gala people were charged with getting 1,000 people and getting them to commit to a ticket price (starting at \$350 per person) that has never been seen in Akron before.

Q: So what happened?

A: We recruited table captains and asked them to fill the seats, call your friends up... lo and behold, the table captains went way beyond what we ever imagined... we sold out before we printed an invitation...

Q: Did folks eventually get an invitation?

A: We ended up sending what we're calling invitation packets. They include information about valet parking, the schedule of events... Also in the packet is a very gorgeous keepsake invitation... you see an image of the Earth (at night) and the brightest spot on Earth is a dot that appears to be in Akron, Ohio. (It was created by local graphic artist Laura Ruth Bidwell.)

Q: Why is this such a hot ticket?

A: People are excited about the museum and what it's able to offer for the Akron community, and they want to be part of the celebration.

Q: Will the museum make money from this event?

A: Yes. The direct cost (everything from food to table rentals) is about \$150 per ticket. It will be our biggest fundraising event in the museum's history, benefiting the museum's operating budget. Part of the anticipated success of the gala is a result of the incredible support from our signature sponsor, Akron Plastic Surgeons, which donated \$100,000 to the gala. That is believed to be the largest underwriting gift ever given in Akron to a black-tie fundraising event.

Q: How much will you raise?

A: I don't want to jinx us. I want to report it when we're done.

Q: What's on the menu? The guests are likely to have high expectations.

A: We want the whole night to be a surprise. People are going to be dazzled.

Q: What can you reveal?

A: The night starts in the museum with a pre-party, where people will get a chance to see the art actually hanging in the galleries. And all 1,500 of us are then walking over to the Knight Center (a block south) for our sit-down dinner... The guests come back to the museum for a big dessert buffet... There is a deejay back at the museum at the end of the night... He does parties for Oprah. He's DJ Cassidy, out of New York. (Scott Griffith, former owner of the Carousel Dinner Theatre, is the event producer.)

Q: Are you worried about anyone sloshing a drink on a painting?

A: We will not be allowing wine or food or drinks into the gallery spaces. This is a very common practice for fine art museums all over the country. We'll limit food and beverage to the lobby, which is meant to be a big gathering space.

Q: What about the public opening of the museum?

A: On July 15, there will be a free sneak peek from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Those tickets (distributed via libraries) are gone already as well. Over 3,300 tickets were distributed. We are doing a couple of days prior -- Friday, July 13, and Saturday, July 14, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. for members. People can still buy a membership and get in those days. (Annual individual memberships start at \$50; annual household memberships start at \$65.) Our first day of business for the public is Tuesday, July 17.

Q: What is the first exhibit?

A: Prized Images: The Knight Purchase Award for Photographic Media 1991-2006. These works are all part of our collection... it's the first time these works will be shown as a collection. (This exhibit, running July 17 through Oct. 14, will include works by Harry Callahan, Richard Misrach and Sophie Calle.)

Q: What is the next major exhibit?

A: American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell. The Norman Rockwell Museum (in Stockbridge, Mass.) is putting together a new traveling exhibition and we are the first museum to get the exhibition. (It opens Nov. 10 and runs through Feb. 3, 2008.)

- Inaugural reopening and ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Akron Art Museum: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. July 17 at 1 S. High St., Akron.
- With the reopening, admission no longer will be free. Instead, admission will be \$7 for adults, \$5 for students and 65 or older, and free for younger than 12; members also get in free.
- Museum hours after opening: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays. Closed Mondays.
- The Thursday evening outdoor summer concert series -- Downtown@Dusk -- will return to the museum grounds at 8:30 p.m. Aug. 9-Sept. 27.
- For information, call 330-376-9185 or go to www.akronartmuseum.org.