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# Where Art Is Child's Play

By LAUREL GRAEBER

The bar at 103 Charlton Street buzzed with excited chatter at its grand opening, as more than a dozen young Saturday revelers waited to get in. Joe Vena leaned over the black granite countertop, cheerfully taking orders with a New York bartender's consummate skill.

"I know what I want, Joe," one patron said, and Mr. Vena nodded, also acknowledging the request of the eager customer on the stool next to her.

"A bat and a peacock?" he said. "Excellent. Coming right up."

These were not the latest exotic cocktails from a purveyor of downtown chic, but two of the many possibilities at the Clay Bar at the Children's Museum of the Arts, which this month opened its new 10,000-square-foot space in the building's former loading dock. At the bar children order an object, and a staff teaching artist prepares the clay, arrayed on shelves where Grey Goose and Johnnie Walker would ordinarily stand. (The space can function as a real bar during fund-raisers.)

Mr. Vena, also manager of the museum's Media Lab, offered tools and pointers but never took over the projects. He molded a sample bat's head from gray clay, showing Maxyne Watkins, a 9-year-old from the Bronx, how a pencil's tip could create eyes. She then began working on her own bat. "You get to do art and all different things here that other museums don't let you do," she said.

All children's museums hold art workshops, but the Children's Museum of the Arts intends its new home in the South Village to underscore just how much it differs from its peers. While other such institutions often emphasize science, literacy and creative play, this one focuses almost exclusively on making art: not just drawings and sculpture, but also sound art and stop-motion animation. On opening day, Oct. 1, many children took what they had made in the Clay Bar next door to the Media Lab, where they filmed their creations on landscapes of plastic foam and discarded electronic parts. Others went to the Sound Booth to experiment with electronic scores.

"We're not real gimmicky," said David Kaplan, the museum's executive director, during a stroll through the space. "Our teaching artists come here because they're serious about art."

The museum demonstrates its own seriousness in its permanent collection, comprising art dating to the 1930s. Although the Brooklyn Children's Museum also has permanent holdings, consisting mostly of cultural and natural history artifacts, the Children's Museum of the Arts is the only institution in New York City collecting international children's artwork. Since 1987, a year before it opened in far more modest quarters in SoHo, it has acquired about 2,000 pieces.

But Mr. Kaplan stressed that the museum has never been an oversize version of a doting parent's



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Above: The Groove Tube, an area dedicated to physical activity, at the Children's Museum of the Arts.

Left: Joe Vena, behind the bar, takes orders and helps children turn mounds of clay into sculptures at the Clay Bar

refrigerator door. "For the collection, we're looking more for art from an historic period or another country," he said. "We just got 40 pieces from a schoolteacher from Harlem in 1963." The museum also owns art from African villages and children's paintings made during the Works Progress Administration.

Rotating pieces from the collection, now mostly stored on site, hang on the walls in the new space, which is almost triple the size of the old. The design, by Dan Wood and Amale Andraos, the married principals of Work Architecture Company, is at the heart of a \$6.8 million capital campaign. Financed by public and private sources, the project aims to put what was once a small but industrious museum firmly on New York's cultural map.

"We were seen as a dark horse," Mr. Kaplan said. "No one had ever heard of us." Still, the

museum enjoyed steady but quiet success, finally outgrowing its former Lafayette Street space. The strategy for the new location seems to be working: on opening day, the museum admitted 1,600 visitors, 500 more than in the entire month of December at its old address.

Mr. Wood and Ms. Andraos turned one of the site's challenges — its long, rectangular core — into a 2,000-square-foot art gallery. The inaugural exhibition, "Make Art (in) Public," consists, surprisingly, of mostly adult work: sketches, photos, models and actual pieces by artists like Keith Haring, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the Austrian visionary Friedensreich Hundertwasser and Tranqui Yanqui, who makes wearable art from cardboard. One wall features a sea goddess by Swoon; another has "Heart the World," a mural commissioned from Remed. The outsider artist Moondog is represented by



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“Thalassa,” a mural of a sea goddess by Swoon, is part of the inaugural exhibition, “Make Art (in) Public,” at the Children’s Museum of the Arts.



Ryan Naideau, left, a teaching artist at the museum, with Alex Dembner, 9, in the Sound Booth. At right, Remed’s “Heart the World” mural is in the lobby.

both a life-size model (he resembled a “Lord of the Rings” wizard), and one of his sound scores.

“It’s a mixture between art being fun and spunky and really free, but that also is trying to raise awareness about issues and has a public conscience,” said Prescott Trudeau, the show’s curator. Haring, Mr. Trudeau said, “was an inspiring force when the museum was created.” Displaying public projects emphasizes one of the museum’s fundamental tenets: that art can have a positive impact on communities and children.

The opening demonstrated this serendipitously, when Raymond Goris, 34, visiting with his wife, Lisa, and toddler, Tristan, recognized himself as a beaming 10-year-old in an exhibition photo of a Haring 1987 Lower East Side workshop. “He came to the Boys’ Club, where I was a member,” Mr. Goris said, grinning. “We had so much fun that day.”

The museum’s studio areas include Wee Arts, for preschoolers, and two art labs, each with a magnetic, dry-erase wall. An invention that looks fresh off a flying saucer separates two art studios for older children: a multitiered sink, nine feet in diameter, with nine faucets operated by stomping buttons in the floor. “We were thinking, ‘How can we make hand washing fun for kids?’” Mr. Wood said.

The architects also brightened the museum’s mostly white interior with vibrant color accents. He described the Clay Bar as “Adolf Loos meets New York dive bar meets purple.”

A Quiet Room offers storybooks and soft furniture, while the museum’s mezzanine level incorporates its one concession to pure physical play: the Groove Tube, with a small slide, a webbed floor, portholes and a ball pond, filled with balls to leap into. Strollers have been

consigned to a parking room, complete with a garage’s painted lines. “In our old space people coming in tripped over strollers,” said Elizabeth Fearon Pepperman, the museum’s president of the board. “It was a turnoff to older kids.”

Attracting them has become the museum’s latest priority. The art gallery is one draw, but @5, a program of evening classes — with pizza — gives 13-to-15-year-olds opportunities to design fashion or study advanced filmmaking or drawing and painting. The museum has also received financing from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to offer further opportunities for this age group.

“We never did teen programming before,” Mr. Kaplan said. “That’s a huge leap for us. It doesn’t mean we aren’t serving 1-to-2-year-olds — we are. We haven’t moved away from our roots. We’ve just grown the tree a little larger.”