Tears of Joy for LAGUNA GLORIA

The Hallowed Grounds Spring Back to Life as the Contemporary Austin Gives New Purpose to Its Original Home

BY CAITLIN GREENWOOD • P.34
Glorious Renewal

The Contemporary Austin gives new life to the place where it all began, Laguna Gloria

BY CAITLIN CREEKWOOD

Austin hides its ghosts well, but if you know where to look, the spirits of the city’s past residents still buzz about. They debate and dance around the Capital as families and political advocates grace the town. With wry, buried brown, they audibly walk across the University of Texas campus while current students keep pace in their fading steps. One studied the Contemporary Austin’s newly acquired Paul McCarthy place, a bronze sculpture of an imposing Snow White, in the Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park, her ghostly face hinting at curiosity and excitement. She’s gone before you can approach her. It was a glimpse of Clara Driscoll, a woman with a reputation that has stood the test of time. Or, it should have.

Somehow down the line, Driscoll’s remarkable history fell victim to cultural amnesia. If you know of her at all, it’s probably through the Alamo, which Driscoll helped secure as a historical site, or the brief marker tacked away on the grounds of her old residence: the villa at Laguna Gloria. A Texan by way of Ireland, Driscoll was a woman who represented all the charming bawdiness and good humor of the state she called home. Her grandfather had emigrated from County Cork and fought to secure Texas freedom in the Battle of San Jacinto. Her father and uncle, both Civil War veterans, began a multimillion-dollar ranching, banking, and commercial development business in Corpus Christi. Clara Driscoll was as Texan as they come and raised accordingly. She spoke four languages fluently and was educated in both New York and France. She published two novels before the age of 20. Her three-act comic opera Mercosora debuted in New York City and ran for 82 performances. In 1909, she headed over roughly $75,000 in cash to secure the land around the Alamo to continue its preservation as a historical site, a project that would carry on throughout Driscoll’s life. She led the Texas Democratic Party as its national committeewoman for 14 years and was an ardent supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Upon her death, The New York Times magazine called her “Even for Texas, a woman like Clara Driscoll was something... Politicians soon learned to respect her: She could drink, bathe, curse and converse with the bast of them, outranked practically all of them.”

She was a philanthropist, creative, and trailblazer — and wanted to give that imaginative spirit to everything she touched. It’s no surprise that her Austin legacy emerged as Laguna Gloria. The property itself possesses a prestigious background. It was originally owned by Stephen F. Austin, but he never got around to developing it. Years later, the land fell into the hands of the Seven founding editors of the Austin American and Driscoll’s husband B. and Clara designed the villa in the style of the country houses at Italy’s Lake Como. They broke ground in 1914, and the villa was completed in 1938. Clara dedicated herself to the site, designing the garden landscape that still exist today. In its heyday, Laguna Gloria hosted Texas’ best minds for political functions, dinner parties, and artistic salons, serving as the site for international events as well as respected community events. It represented the creative editor’s ambition to bring old-world sophistication to the still-emergent state of Texas. It was Austin’s aristocratic bush, and at its center was Clara.

In 1938, however, that all ended when Driscoll’s husband died. Five years later, Clara gave up Laguna Gloria, donating it, along with $20,000, to the Texas Fine Arts Association for the intent of having the land used as “a Museum to bring pleasing and picturesque objects of art to the people of Texas.” The TFAA had been established 32 years earlier to honor another famous Austinite, Elsworth Ne兹, with a mission to promote the arts throughout the state. Its early efforts included preserving Ne兹’s studio and sculpturing, eventually fortifying the Elsworth Ne兹 Museum in 1929. After Clara’s donation, the TFAA oversaw the Laguna Gloria property until 1961, when the association split. From then, Laguna Gloria Art Museum was born, and it’s mission maintaining the villa’s grounds, as well as providing education and exhibiting art. From the Sixties through the Eighties, Laguna Gloria was a busy site for not only visual art but also film screenings, band and theatre performances, and music concerts, much of which took place under the oak trees in the amphitheater by the villa. Most notably, the LGAM hosted the annual art fair, Pastic. The spring event began in 1950 (which continues today as Art City Austin) brought the city’s residents out to Laguna Gloria’s drives and was a major fundraiser for the museum. With over 8,000 volunteers helping to put it together, Pastic captivated Austin and its arts scene through the Eighties and into the Nineties. In 1983, the Art School’s 4,000-square-foot facility was erected on Laguna Gloria’s grounds and seemed to open up the potential for the villa’s future. By that time, however, the museum had begun to pursue a dream of building a larger facility Downtown, and in 1996, it moved to The Jepsen Center for Contemporary Art on Rio Piner Avenue. In 2002, the museum opened the Jepsen Center for Contemporary Art, and four years later it abandoned itself: Neither the museum nor the land that housed it were passed with the two museums programming art within blocks of each other on the same street. Then in 2011, when Amon Carter and AMOA celebrated their 100th and 50th anniversaries, respectively, the institutions announced their merger.

Moreover, the union — or reunion, considering their status before the 1961 split — was marred with uncertainty that the two museums, which had separately experienced financial struggles and difficulty maintaining a donor base, would be stronger as one. It also raised questions about what kind of art the new institution would exhibit: established or emerging? local or international? It was decided that the main galleries would be in the Jepsen Center, but there was the lingering question of what to do with Laguna Gloria. While the Art School was still in operation, the villa remained undamaged, sleeping, seeing more action as a rental venue for weddings than a vital gallery space. It took the arrival of Louis Grafman for Laguna Gloria’s potential to be revived.
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work and integrated, multi-figured programming, uplifting both SITE Santa Fe's reception and its professional reputation. Its expansive vision earned him the directorship of the Albright-Knox Gallery in 2002. All of that talent and drive, however, is only part of what makes Grachos so compelling. He commands a room not by force but by gravitas. At an event, Grachos can be seen bustling attending to his duties as executive director, occasionally with a mantin in hand, while still perfectly addressing each of his guests. Ever the host, Grachos devotes attention to his audience, making everyone from the young artist to the senior patron feel welcome. He’s a family man with a son, James, who attends RISD. Grachos adds proudly that his son plays hockey for the university, and he does his best to make it out to games. He enjoys traveling, wherever possible and seeks out studio visits in tandem with gallery exhibitions. Grachos chooses his words wisely and speaks sincerely when his thoughts seem to get away from him, but is composed when faced with a subject that eludes him. His ingenuity is inestimable, yet his temperament is always serene. He is a man capable of great warmth and generosity who truly believes in celebrating artists and their craft, whether they be found in a New York gallery or on the ice rinks of Detroit.

Though Grachos himself calmly sauntered into his role as executive director of ABMA, his arrival marked a dramatic change for the institution. After years of what was perceived as creative stagnancy, the museum was suddenly pushing forward with a new creative identity and putting plans into motion. There was a rebrand, which abandoned both old names for something more current: the Contemporary Austin. New staff was brought in, including head curator Heather Pesanti, who accompanied Grachos from the Albright-Knox. For some, this new era felt tainted with the same intense growth facing the entire city. Critics claimed the change raised another transplant from New York arriving in Austin to shape the city to his liking, which would mean bigger but perhaps not better. Grachos’ first exhibitions (intimate affairs with members-only openings and exclusive dinners) did little to ease those anxieties. Austin’s citywide cultural growth thus far had yielded little more than flashy high-rises, increased congestion, and a sky-rocketing cost of living; and Grachos looked to be one more outsider ready to build all the As artists began to work with the space, Laguna Gloria’s overgrown, dormant grounds became trim, neat, and outfitted with sculptures by some of contemporary art’s most renowned names.

Charles Long, Olly Genger, and Marianne Vitale to tour the grounds with the idea of installing work there and he found many of them excited by the prospect because of how unique to Austin the museum’s lakefront location is. Though change was coming quickly to Laguna Gloria, Grachos made one thing very clear: "Under any plan (we might conceive), we want to maintain the texture and vision that Clara Driscoll provided for the grounds. It’s very important to do that. Although the programming inside the building will probably shift and change, the integrity of the architecture and the surrounding formal gardens will be intact. But by including (art), we can truly activate those spaces.” And as artists began to work with the space, Laguna Gloria’s overgrown, dormant grounds became trim, neat, and outfitted with sculptures by some of contemporary art’s most renowned names, such as Tom Sachs and Do Ho Suh. In two short years, Laguna Gloria has been newly invigorated by the efforts of Grachos and his team. Liam Gillick’s rainbow-hued Railled Laguna Discussion Platform (2017) frames the villa’s legateum, once overgrown, and now neatly tied to frame the sculpture. Vitalis’ Contaminations, steel sculptures made from train tracks, junctions, now stenciled anchor one of Laguna Gloria’s newscapes. John Grade’s stone sculpture on of Concept Trough with its high Ipe wood paneling creates an elegant funnel amongst a grove’s stately trees. Visitors can be seen strolling across the grounds, taking their time moving through the dynamic work. But it’s not just the sculpture that is drawing new audiences. The Contemporary’s education efforts include events like Second Saturdays and Teens Create which seek to address and include the community’s largest creative interests. The space has been transformed, and the progress has shown no signs of slowing down.

Grachos and the Contemporary’s board have some good goals in the works. They are new, and they do nothing but expand the public’s access to all of Laguna Gloria’s grounds and make those more accommodating for visitors. Boston-based landscape architect firm Bird Hillard is developing a master plan for the 13-acre property. And Grachos has insisted on adding an artist residency on-site. Though small, Grachos believes only one or two artists would be able to occupy the buildings dedicated to the residency and studio space, it is a step that mirrors Driscoll’s original ambitions of bringing an internationl forum creative community to Laguna Gloria and providing it a place to flourish. When asked what Grachos wants most to accomplish with the space, he smiles. "We want to advance the potential for Laguna Gloria.”

However, it is the site’s history that has left the lasting impression. In a city that has grown so rapidly and has arguably stumped in preserving its past, Laguna Gloria recalls a time in Austin when creativity was truly limitless. And as for Clara Driscoll, her legacy is shining ever brighter. Clara stands as a beacon for the profound good that can come from supporting a creative community and believing in the people that make it happen to see the future in our current state of capitalism. That pride and community is what attracted people to Laguna Gloria from around the world—and it’s time once again for that Texas spirit to return creativity home.