



BMA Behind the Scenes

Winter 2013

New Light for the Galleries

Everyone who works at the BMA wants the artworks in the galleries to look their very best. A thorough cleaning or an elegant frame will certainly add to a painting's allure, but there is something else that contributes greatly to an artwork's appeal: lighting.

During the Museum's recent renovation of its Contemporary Wing, an entirely new track lighting system was installed. Now visitors can enjoy the most up-to-date galleries where colors are vivid, textures are sharp, polished surfaces shine, and the smallest details are easy to discern.

There are more than 600 new lighting fixtures in the BMA's contemporary galleries and, surprisingly, a great many of them are directed at the ceiling, floor, and bare wall surfaces rather than at the artworks themselves. "If you don't do that," explains BMA Lighting Designer Kel Millionie, "visitors would feel as if they were walking around in a big dark cave. You have to light the room first and then you can light the art."

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Photo by Steven Taylor

This photograph shows electricians installing one section of the new track lighting system that creates a grid over the entire ceiling of the contemporary galleries. Lights inserted into the top of the track will face upward to illuminate the ceiling. Lights inserted into the slot on the bottom of the track will shine down on the floor.

When installation is complete, visitors will see rectangular and circular fixtures attached to the same track. The rectangular lamps will create a subtle "wash" of light on the walls while circular "object lights" will brighten individual artworks.

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Photo by Steven Taylor

<
Electricians
install track
lighting in
Gallery 6.

>
Gallery 6
after
reinstallation
is complete.

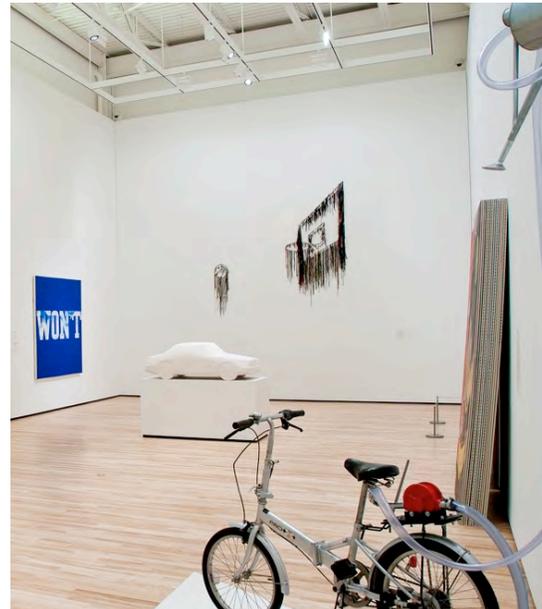


Photo by Mitro Hood

It usually takes Kel about a week to design and light a single gallery. Each space demands a unique plan that considers the size of the room, the height of the ceiling, the color and reflective quality of the walls, and the kind of artwork on display. Since artworks on paper are especially vulnerable to fading and deterioration from excessive exposure to light, the gallery devoted exclusively to prints, drawings, and photographs can be only one third as bright as areas where paintings or sculptures are on view.

The process of lighting artworks in museum galleries can be tricky. On the one hand, Kel must always remember that museum visitors deserve a light-filled environment where they can see the artworks clearly and read labels without having to strain. On the other hand, he must take great care to protect all the artworks from light damage, heeding the judgment and advice of museum curators and conservators who are responsible for their wellbeing. Like a performer executing a difficult balancing act, Kel must use his technical skill as an electrician, his broad knowledge of available lamps and fixtures, his genuine concern for the safety of each piece, and his artist's sensitivity to the quality of light as he creates gallery spaces where all the artworks look their best.

Connecting to 21st-Century Themes: Environmental Literacy

Lighting Designers must respect a museum's need for energy efficiency and cost-saving practices. The largest single gallery in the BMA's Contemporary Wing uses lamps equaling 6,000 to 8,000 watts. In contrast, a bedroom at home might use about 90 watts.

The fluorescent light bulbs pictured here are just a few of the many fixtures that were removed from the Contemporary Wing and recycled. They were replaced by newer LED fixtures that are more energy efficient, longer-lasting, and safe.



Photo by Howard Korn