



Left: Asia Society Museum exhibition *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History*, Sept 2017

A New Voice

The Katonah Museum of Art has made an inspired decision by appointing Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe as its next executive director. **BY PAUL ADLER**

The arts have always been much more than a diversion for Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe. “Art is not just a pretty picture, but it really has a transformative power that goes beyond aesthetics,” she says. This passion is matched by Yun Mapplethorpe’s experience. She was previously VP for Global Artistic Programs at the Asia Society, as well as director of the Asia Society Museum. Now, as executive director of the Katonah Museum of Art (KMA), Yun

looking for a new position. “But the more I talked to the board about their vision and the direction they wanted to take the museum, the more excited I became and the more ideas came into my head about how I could use my experience and expertise to really bring the museum to the next level and make it a destination institution, not only in the Tristate area but globally.”

And Yun Mapplethorpe does indeed sport some serious expertise. In



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Mapplethorpe is embarking on a new venture to enrich the people of her community and beyond.

“I feel that [the KMA has] a stellar reputation in terms of their curatorial programming, and I have been aware of some of their past exhibitions,” says Yun Mapplethorpe, who takes up her post on August 15. However, when the KMA’s board first reached out, she was not exactly

in addition to her 12 years at The Asia Society, she was a curatorial assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, where she “received mentoring from some of the greatest curators of the 20th century” before becoming a curator herself at the Hunter College Art Galleries. She is a lecturer and widely published author, sits on the advisory board of the Mount Holyoke

College Art Museum, and was a consulting curator at Beijing’s Museum of China Cultural Arts.

“I have been working professionally in the museum field for over 25 years, and I have had every job up the totem pole,” notes Yun Mapplethorpe, “so I have a fundamental understanding of what it takes to run a museum.”

Yun Mapplethorpe’s Chinese heritage is yet another boon. “I think my experience working with Asian art and Asian American artists, as well as my own identity as an Asian American woman, will bring a different perspective — one that is not so commonly found in the field. So, I can think more holistically maybe than others might in this position.”

Ahead, Yun Mapplethorpe has plenty of plans for the KMA, including an increased focus on virtual programming; a New York City outpost, such as “an experimental or residency space that can gain visibility for the museum”; and summits “that are looking at timely issues in the arts field to build networks, keep a professional dialogue going, and serve as a forum so that international colleagues can come to Katonah and talk about the issues that we are all grappling with together,” she says.

However, this does not mean that Yun Mapplethorpe will be storming ahead unilaterally with a fleet of major changes. “I work collaboratively, and that will hopefully put the staff at ease in terms of my not throwing everything away and just cleaning the slate,” she says. “Instead, looking at the legacy and the important work they have done up ’til now and asking, *How can we amplify that and make it even grander for this next chapter?*”

Yet, at the heart of all these plans shines Yun Mapplethorpe’s abiding belief in the power of art. “For me, arts and culture aren’t in a vacuum,” she says. “Transnationally and cross-culturally, they are very powerful. Politics is often very divisive, whereas art can bring people together and has such a capacity to engender greater empathy and understanding. I feel that is so important, especially now.” **w**