

Las Vegas
strives to define
itself as a
cultural center,
with a trove of
new galleries and
a massive public
fine art collection.



From left: CityCenter stands tall on the Las Vegas strip;
Jenny Holzer, *Vegas*, 2009, LED panels with white diodes,
located at Aria Resort and Casino's north valet.

JENNIFER YOUNG

Art On Va



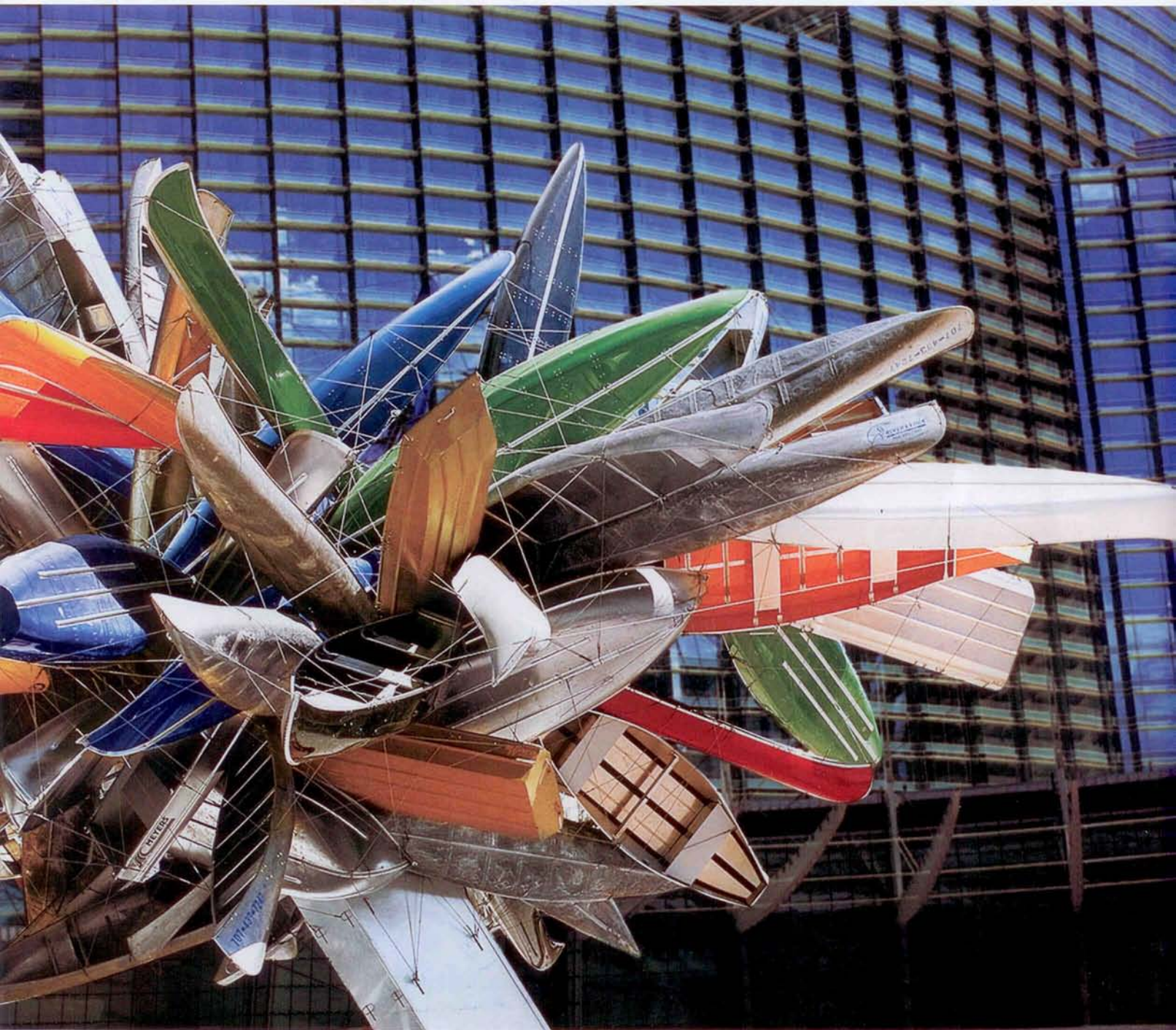
cation

By Jenna Sims

LAS VEGAS is a city brimming with grand—and sometimes over-the-top—architecture and design, and yet the art scene there has had its fair share of ups and downs. In April 2008 the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum closed its doors after seven years at the Venetian, and in February 2009 the 59-year-old Las Vegas Art Museum followed suit, with museum officials hopeful that it will reopen when the economic climate improves. “While most cities have a cultural history and it builds,” says Michele Quinn, a private and corporate curatorial adviser who has worked in the Las Vegas and New York markets, “it’s sort of a reinventing process that happens here.” As an art center, Quinn says, Las Vegas is still in its infancy.



Inevitably, art in Las Vegas has been tied to the hospitality and entertainment industries, the city's lifeblood. In 2004, when the MGM Mirage, the parent company of a group of hotels including Bellagio, MGM Grand, The Mirage, Mandalay Bay and more, first revealed its plan to build the \$8 billion 67-acre mixed-use development known as CityCenter (which opened in December 2009 and is located on the Strip between the Bellagio and Monte Carlo), it made a point of bringing new experiences to the city. MGM Mirage set out to create an unparalleled campus of hotels,



residential properties, a casino, retail shops and entertainment venues, and in the process, CityCenter became the most expensive privately funded construction project in U.S. history.

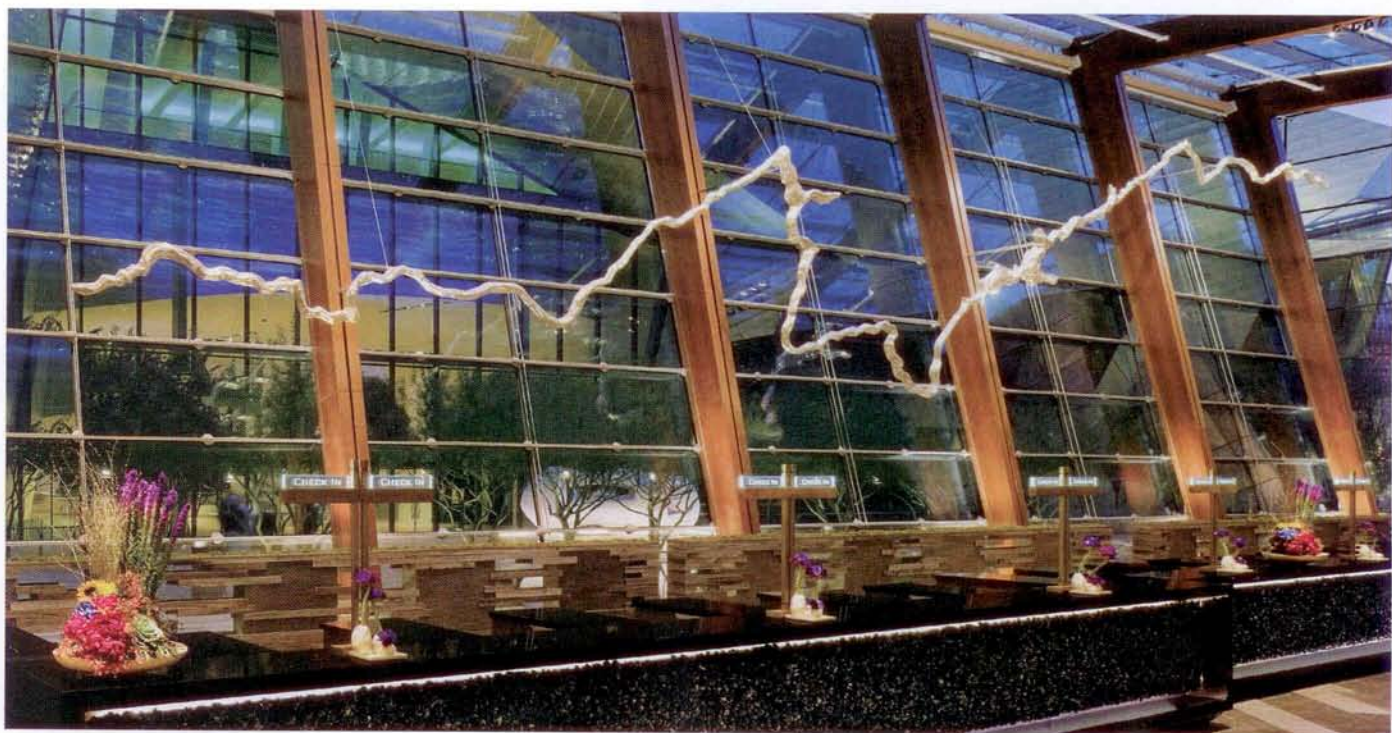
Sven van Assche, MGM Mirage's vice president of design, chose eight world-renowned architectural firms to bring the CityCenter project to life, including Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects of Connecticut, who designed the centerpiece of the campus: the 61-story, 4000-room Aria Resort & Casino. Headed by Cesar Pelli and Fred Clarke, the firm designed the

Nancy Rubins, *Big Edge*, 2009, stainless steel and aluminum water vessels, located at Vdara Hotel's main drive.



World Financial Center in New York and worked on the 1984 expansion of the Museum of Modern Art (which doubled its existing gallery space and added an auditorium and residential tower). Helmut Jahn was hired to design CityCenter's Veer Towers, so called because the two 37-story condominiums veer toward each other. "We wanted to create the identity of the project through architecture," says Van Assche. "We've been very concerned about every square inch of what is being designed and built."

For Jim Murran, chairman and CEO of MGM Mirage, another important aspect of the project was to create a fine art collection that would be available to the public 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In 2006 Murran, himself an art enthusiast and collector, hired Quinn to create a \$40 million Fine Art Collection for CityCenter. Fifteen large-scale artworks and sculptures, as well as many smaller pieces such as works on paper and paintings, were commissioned to be installed in various spaces throughout the CityCenter campus. Maya Lin's 84-foot-long, 3,700-pound sculpture *Silver*



River (2009), representing the Colorado River, is suspended above the registration desk in Aria. Tony Cragg's three towering stainless steel columns, *Bolt* (2007), *Bent of Mind* (2008) and *Untitled* (2008), welcome guests into Aria's lobby near the self-parking structure. Nancy Rubins' *Big Edge* (2009), made up of more than 100 stainless steel and aluminum boats, stands directly in front of Vdara's main drive. Works by Frank Stella, Peter Wegner, Robert Rauschenberg and Masatoshi Izumi, among others, are installed throughout the dense CityCenter space.

Henry Moore's marble *Reclining Connected Forms* (1969–74) rests in a park-like setting between Aria and the Crystals retail center. Installing these large-scale artworks during the construction of the buildings proved to be a challenging task. According to Quinn, a "house" had to be built around Moore's sculpture to keep it secure. Perhaps the most eye-grabbing installation is Jenny Holzer's *Vegas* (2009), a 250-foot-long, 20-foot-high

Clockwise from left: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*, 1998–99, stainless steel, fiberglass and acrylic paint, at Crystals Place; a view of the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art's exhibition featuring works by the artists and architects of CityCenter; Maya Lin, *Silver River*, 2009, cast reclaimed silver, suspended above the registration desk at Aria.

From left: Two views of the Richard MacDonald gallery, located at Crystals Place; Henry Moore, *Reclining Connected Forms*, 1969-74, Roman travertine marble, located outside between Aria and Crystals retail center.



panel of LEDs that brightens Aria's north valet entrance. As guests take the escalator down from the main lobby to the valet space, more than 200 of Holzer's famous *Truisms* quickly move across the panels. "All the movement is incredible," says Quinn, who was told by Holzer that this is the artist's largest installation to date. "At the very least, what we've done is changed your physical experience of this piece," Quinn adds, commenting on how the words magically reflect on the space's stainless steel ceiling and floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

CityCenter's Fine Art Collection is the largest corporate-funded public art collection in the world. For Quinn and Van Assche, the CityCenter project presented an opportunity for Las Vegas to enhance its cultural experiences, not only for tourists but for local residents as well. "It's a less intimidating environment for people to see and experience art," explains Quinn. "It's not being forced upon you; we're doing it in a way

where you can live and exist with it. You don't have to have an art history degree to understand it. It's part of life and part of our daily existence."

Collectors and enthusiasts also have a variety of galleries to choose from around the city: Hotels such as the Bellagio and the Venetian are home to galleries that sell a wide range of art, from contemporary painting to sculpture, and many galleries in the downtown Las Vegas arts district feature international mid-career artists as well as local artists.

In addition, a group of art galleries opened in December at Crystals Place, a new wing of art space in CityCenter, including the Gallery, which opened with an exhibition of Dale Chihuly's dynamic glass sculptures in December; The Art of Richard MacDonald, dedicated to the contemporary figurative sculptor who specializes in the human form; Rodney Lough Jr. Wilderness Collections Gallery, which features Lough's vivid eye for landscape photography; and Centerpiece Gallery, a joint venture between CityCenter and Quinn that focuses on a variety of contemporary mediums, with an emphasis on the artists and architects of CityCenter. (Quinn

has since moved to Philadelphia to expand her art curatorial business but continues to oversee Centerpiece.)

The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, or BGFA, which opened in 1998, is also reinventing itself, as more of a museum exhibition space. To coincide with the grand opening of CityCenter, Quinn and BGFA director Tarissa Tiberti put together the exhibition *12 + 7: Artists and Architects of CityCenter*, on view through April 4. Visitors are able to see the models of Lin's *Silver River* and Cragg's *Bolt* or the sketches of Rubins' *Big Edge* before viewing the larger installations at CityCenter. The show will "introduce viewers to the creative minds that went into developing (CityCenter), as well as offer some unique insights about the project overall," says Tiberti. BGFA's motto is "where great art goes on vacation." Next up for BGFA is the exhibition *Figuratively Speaking: A Survey of the Human Form*, opening in May, which will feature works by such artists as Renoir, Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Lichtenstein and others, from the MGM Mirage collection and on loan from the MFA Boston and the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego.

Tiberti is optimistic about the future of the city's art scene: "It's a young scene, but that's what makes it so exciting—the possibilities are infinite." 