

SAAR

THE SUN

Claremont's Benton Museum of Art due to open at last

By: David Allen

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This Alison Saar bronze, "Imbue," is a permanent part of the courtyard outside the new Benton Museum of Art. The Pomona College institution is finally able to have its opening

Saturday after a 14-month delay due to coronavirus. (Photo by David Allen, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

It's not every day an art museum opens in the Inland Empire. Maybe every six months, though, with [Riverside's Cheech due next May](#). On Saturday, Claremont's [Benton Museum of Art](#) is finally flinging open its doors for its COVID-delayed debut.

It's also not every day that I can walk to an assignment. But that was the case Wednesday, when I left home on foot, notebook in hand, and ambled to the museum for a tour. It's five minutes from my place. ("Be sure to stretch before you go!" one colleague joked.)

This opening is a long time coming. Construction finished more than two years ago in June 2019.

I can barely remember June 2019, although I vaguely recall that it was nice then. Supposedly the museum, an institution of Pomona College, would open in September 2020, which seemed absurdly far off.

But there was a lot to do internally, such as testing systems and moving from the museum's old home. The most complex was to transport its collection of 17,000 items from various storage sites around campus, label them and log their new location into the database.



Steve Comba shows off Karl Benjamin paintings and other works stored in one of the vaults of the Benton Museum of Art on a tour Wednesday. (Photo by David Allen, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

Twelve students “packed every object and tagged them. They’ve seen more of the collections than I have, individually,” said Steve Comba, the associate director, who’s been with the museum 35 years.

When Victoria Sancho Lobis arrived on Jan. 6, 2020 for her first day as museum director, after six years in various roles at the Art Institute of Chicago, she immediately worried how the facility would make its September opening.

This turned out not to be a problem. Coronavirus restrictions shut down the museum’s then-current home and spelled a premature end to its [Todd Gray exhibition and programming](#).

As spring turned to summer and fall and the original opening date came and went, nothing seemed to be happening. All of us who [walked off our COVID anxiety along College Avenue](#) did enjoy having the museum

there, even if it was inert. It was like a massive outdoor sculpture put there for our amusement, its courtyard and garden a pleasant place to wander.

It turned out the Benton did have exhibits, but the only people who saw them were students, and they only saw the art remotely, via Zoom.

Sancho Lobis told me: “Our joke was we were installing art exhibits to have movies about them.” It does sound overly conceptual.

This semi-limbo status had the odd effect of helping the Benton fit into the landscape. There had been [some community anger over the plans](#), which required that [a stately home be trucked out of the way](#) to allow for the museum’s construction.

The Benton has awakened gradually. Starting in May, people have been allowed inside by reservation, the art-world version of a soft opening.



Patrons on a group tour walk through the Alison Saar exhibition Wednesday at the Benton Museum of Art. The Pomona College museum is open via reservation with limited occupancy. (Photo by David Allen, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

“We felt access to our beautiful space, our safe space, was important. To get people out of their house, we wanted to be open,” Sancho Lobis said.

The museum has six galleries. Its main exhibition spotlights Alison Saar, daughter of Betye, in her first major museum show. Half is at the Benton and half is at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena. Times critic Christopher Knight [called the full show “enthraling.”](#)

Other current shows are by Sadie Barnette, involving her former Black Panther father’s FBI surveillance file, and by Helen Pashgian, from the Light and Space movement. Contemporary art, especially by emerging artists from Southern California, and more particularly by women and marginalized communities, is the museum’s exhibition focus.

With students back on campus, November seemed like the time to have a more traditional opening, with tours, music, art-making events for families, even a ribbon-cutting, [taking place from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 13](#), at the museum, 120 W. Bonita Ave.

“After many months of waiting,” Sancho Lobis said, “we’re finally ready to welcome the community with open arms.”

From six feet away, I asked?

“Not a full body embrace,” she affirmed with a laugh.

After Saturday’s opening, the museum will return to its 2 to 6 p.m. hours Tuesday to Saturday, with reservations recommended to limit occupancy. Admission is free. Let me note for farther-flung readers that Claremont is served by Metrolink and the museum is three blocks from the station.

At 33,000 square feet, the facility is three times the size of its old home in the Montgomery Art Center, which the museum had occupied since 1958.

“We joked about the old building that there was so much lipstick on that pig, it was all lipstick,” Comba said as he led tours Wednesday of the three vaults.

Those vaults house the fabled 17,000 objects: works on paper, including sketches by [Jose Clemente Orozco for the Pomona College dining hall mural of “Prometheus”](#); paintings and other media; and Native American art objects, such as Cahuilla basketry.

With that, my visit was done. “Enjoy your walk home,” a staffer told me slyly.

I did, but it was over before I knew it.

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Famed Chicano writer Luis Rodriguez visited Pomona’s Garey High for a talk Oct. 22, [the subject of a recent column of mine](#). On Saturday, the nonprofit bookstore and cultural space he co-founded, [Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural & Bookstore](#), is marking its 20th anniversary with music, art vendors and books from 4 to 8 p.m. It’s also a grand opening of its current space, 12677 Glenoaks Blvd. in Sylmar.

David Allen writes Friday, Sunday and Wednesday and reads daily. Email dallen@scng.com, phone 909-483-9339, like [davidallencolumnist](#) on Facebook and follow [@davidallen909](#) on Twitter.

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