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ARTS FOR ALL

Nurturing talent at the Children's Museum of the Arts

Children's Museum Grows Up

The Children's Museum of Art celebrates its 25th anniversary in an airy new home.

By Yukie Ohta
Community Contributor

The Children's Museum of the Arts (CMA), New York's only museum that focuses exclusively on making art, moved into its spacious, airy new home on Charlton Street just over a year ago. Founded in 1988 by Kathleen Schneider, CMA has been serving the SoHo community, as well as New York City at large, for 25 years. Originally located on Spring Street and then for 14 years on Lafayette, CMA's new space has allowed the museum to spread out and grow up.

Known to many SoHo parents and children for its WEE Arts classes designed to develop a young child's familiarity with art making, as well as its afterschool classes for children ages 5-12 in both media-making and fine art mediums, CMA is now focusing its efforts on developing programs for tweens and teens.

"We have a lot of great programs for younger artists and with our new space, we're excited about what we can offer these artists as they age up," explains Jess Peterson, CMA's Communication Coordinator. "It's an exciting niche to get involved with—kids who are not quite old enough to decide where they're going to go and when, but who still need a place that is going to allow them to be active and express themselves, to come up with their own project ideas and be a little more independent."

Free Program for Sixth- to Ninth-graders

CMA has nevertheless done just that with the launch of the Young Artists Kollektive (YAK), a free program for sixth- to ninth-graders, funded by the LMDC, that provides emerging young artists with exclusive studio space and materials, artistic and technical guidance, opportunities to meet with guest artists, and a chance to learn about professional opportunities across the art world. This program "allows kids to engage with each other, work on their own projects and really get introduced to a whole new system of mediums and technology," Peterson says. The only qualification necessary for this program is that members must fall within the age range and have parental permission to participate. There are otherwise no skill requirements or fees involved.

Aspiring artists can join YAK with open-ended goals, to just make art with their friends, or with a specific project in mind, such as to produce a music video or design a mural. Group and individual projects are overseen by CMA's teaching artists Donna Chung and Will Ellis, who provide professional materials, equipment, and guidance, and all members get exclusive

access to CMA's space after hours to work on their art without the distraction of younger children running around.

"I really enjoy working with older kids who are starting to find their voice, develop tastes, and think of art as a means of expression rather than something that's just for fun," says Ellis. "It's refreshing to take a more hands-off approach, acting as a mentor in a setting where young people are coming up with their own projects and taking the lead."

"We have a lot of great programs for younger artists and with our new space, we're excited about what we can offer these artists as they age up."

— Jess Peterson, CMA communication coordinator

YAK members can follow one of two tracks, Fine Art or Film and Media. Chung, who advises members on their fine arts projects, has a background as an interdisciplinary artist and hopes to use a wide range of her experiences to bring a flexibility and expansiveness to the YAK programming. She studied painting at The Rhode Island School of Design and the California College of the Arts and currently shows her artwork at the Klaus von Nichtsagenda Gallery on the Lower East Side.



YAK (Young Artists Kollektive) members pose for photo booth pictures at an Art Slam (above). Art Slams provides a free art party every third Friday of the month for members of Young Artists Kollektive.

Photo by Sean Dunn

Ellis, a filmmaker and photographer who graduated from NYU, advises YAK members working in film and media. Ellis also does a lot of illustration and sculpture, which often comes in handy in his work at the CMA Media Lab. During his off hours, he photographs abandoned places across New York City and writes about their history on his blog at abandonednyc.com.

Inspiration for Tweens and Teens

"As CMA continues to grow as an organization, YAK is a great way for us to work with an extended group of participants," Chung explains. "We have such an amazing following amongst younger children and families, but we are really hoping to be able to provide a tangible and inspirational space for those children as they become tweens, and teens. CMA's mission is to serve diverse audiences, and this is one way in which we can attempt that."

In addition to receiving free studio space, YAK members, who are old enough to socialize with each other without parental supervision but too young to attend concerts and clubs, can also attend monthly Art Slams, exclusive parties for sixth-through ninth-graders with DJs, specialized workshops, guest artists, and pizza, where they can get together with friends and show off their artwork. The YAK program also has an online platform that allows members to share their work with each other as well as in the online art community.

The YAK program was made possible by CMA's capital campaign, "Make Room for Art. Make Art for All," which raised funds for its recent expansion into its new 10,000-square-foot space that includes a 2,000-square-foot gallery, separate studio spaces for older and younger children, a state-of-the-art media lab, and archival storage space for their permanent collection of children's art dating back to the 1930s. This campaign has also allowed CMA to expand its outreach pro-

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CMA's mission is to be a tangible and inspirational space for a diverse audience. Guest artist Max Frieder works on a collaborative mural with a group of young artists.

Photo by Lauren Hatley

A WEE artist admires her work (top). Students experiment with recording software in the Sound Booth (middle). Young visitors enjoy music time during a WEE Arts drop-in session (bottom).

Photos from top: Alex Hoyer, Hannah Sawhney, Alex Hoyer

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grams and double its signature WEE Arts program for children under 5.

WEE Arts Program

Under the direction of Tom Burnett, the WEE Arts program (which stands for "Wonderous, Exploring, Experimenting") is where it all begins. Burnett's classes develop a young child's familiarity with art making and encourage experimentation, exploration, and creative thinking. The program is designed to be a multisensory experience that encourages the development of gross and fine motor skills, as well as socialization and self-expression by exploring art materials such as play dough, paint, and chalk, and activities such as storytelling, music time and jumping around in the ballpond.

Burnett, who joined CMA in 1998, has been acting, directing and playing music in New York since he arrived in 1979 and has presented his work at venues such as The Kitchen, P.S. 122, Bowery Poetry Club, St. Marks Poetry Project, Joe's Pub and The Public Theatre. Burnett's extensive experience teaching early childhood art classes, including 15 years at the 92nd Street Y, along with his background in the performing arts, have informed his unique curriculum design.

Each time children visit a WEE class (with their caregivers), the



CMA also provides artistic opportunities in community locations. Children make clay creatures in CMA's Kid Village at the Dumbo Arts Festival.

Photo by Alex Floran

same series of materials, including collage components, watercolors, and a sticky, slimy substance called "flubber" are present in the same order for the same amount of time. Within these set parameters, the children are encouraged to explore. As their relationship to the materials evolves and matures over time, they build familiarity and confidence with each visit and learn how to use the materials in new ways.

Nurturing Curiosity

"If you empower children to make their own choices in a familiar and safe environment, they will learn naturally," Burnett says. They are never instructed what to make or how to make it, but are guided by teaching artists who understand that the creative process at an early age is all about nurturing curiosity and allowing children to follow through on creative impulses. Each child works at his or her own pace and the WEE Arts programming allows the space for this to happen.

Once children turn four, they can enter the PhD of WEE program that begins the separation process from caregivers and allows them to work on focused activities with familiar materials from the general WEE Arts program while being introduced new materials through projects that require more fine motor skills.

Children can also visit the WEE Arts space during general

And There's More to Explore

In addition to classes for all age groups, CMA offers creative activities supervised by professional artists.

EXHIBITS

- **The Gallery** mounts large-scale art exhibitions 3 to 4 times year, featuring the work of children and that of adults who create relevant work.
- **The WEE Arts Studio** is an art space dedicated for young artists ages 5 and under. Join in on music time, storytelling, painting, drawing, drumming, and much more.
- **The Media Lab** is where visitors create their own films, animations and various other multi media projects.
- **The Clay Bar** features workshops in modeling clay creatures. Stocked with an array of art supplies, tools and inspirational materials, young artists are

given an opportunity to create their own characters.

- **The Fine Arts Studio** allows visitors to explore the world of painting, drawing, textiles and sculpture as they collaborate with experienced teaching artists to produce works of art to take home.
- **The Groove Tube:** A Curated Soundscape gives visitors "ears on" experience of musical genres, original music and soundscapes by CMA's young artists.

PROGRAMS

YAK (FREE)

- **Fine Arts Exclusive:** Monday and Wednesday 5-7 p.m.

- **Media Lab:** Thursdays 3-7 p.m.
- **Art Slams:** 3rd Fridays every month 6:30-9 p.m.

* YAK members have access during general hours

WEE

General admission: \$11 per person
Drop-in class sessions: \$25/family (with half-price general admission)

GENERAL HOURS

Monday, Wednesday 12-5
Tuesday, Closed
Thursday, Friday 12-6
Saturday, Sunday 10-5

ADMISSION FEES

Adult \$11
Child (1 year+) \$11
Infant (0-12 mos) FREE
Seniors (65+) FREE
Members FREE

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The Children's Museum of the Arts has been providing classes and programs for the community for 25 years.

CMA OUTREACH PROGRAMS

CMA in Schools. CMA provides quality arts instruction to schools, camps, and community centers across the city.

Stripes. A free monthly opportunity for children with autism, their siblings and parents to engage in visual art making and imaginative play that will help to develop social interaction and communication skills.

ARTogether. A program that provides an opportunity for families who are receiving preventive services, or have been recently reunified to play in a positive environment.

Inclusive Classes. These weekend classes provide a free opportunity for physically challenged kids ages 7-15 and their able siblings to participate in a class together.

hours for projects geared specifically towards the 5 and under crowd. Less structured than the classes, this afternoon time allows for families to explore art materials in an open-ended fashion, and smocks are optional. "We welcome children's natural messiness," Burnett explains. "We never get dirty here, we like to say we get colorful."

Professional Teaching Artists

When children have aged out of the WEE Program, CMA offers more traditional after school classes for elementary and junior high school-aged children. Students can take classes in a wide range of mediums, from drawing and painting to animation to art history. Taught by professional teaching artists, these classes are designed to build upon age-appropriate art-making

skills while encouraging creative and imaginative expression. Until recently, due to space and funding restrictions, CMA was not able to offer these older students a way to apply the skills acquired in these classes.

With the establishment of YAK, however, young artists can, in a way, come full circle and enjoy the freedom to explore their creativity within set parameters, echoing their experiences in the WEE program. Only this time, these older artists are equipped with the tools to allow them to take their creativity to the next level as they grow into young adults. Burnett says of YAK, "It becomes free-form again. ...They're following their natural impulses to discover themselves."

"We have such an amazing following amongst younger children and families, but we are really hoping to be able to provide a tangible and inspirational space for those children as they become tweens, and teens."

--Donna Chung, CMA teaching artist



CMA celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. As a result of a recent capital campaign, the nonprofit institution was able to move into a larger facility on Charlton Street. A young artist explores the colorful new 2,000-square-foot gallery.

Photo by Alex Hoyer

This year CMA celebrates its 25th anniversary. Although a generation has passed since its founding, it has never lost sight of its core mission to bring art to children regardless of means and ability. If anything, it has finally fulfilled its goal. The WEE Arts Program has long nurtured the creativity of our youngest creative hearts and minds, and now the launch of YAK has insured the launch of a new generation of young New York City artists right here in SoHo.

Location: 103 Charlton St. (between Hudson and Greenwich);
Information: 212-274-0986; cmany.org.

About the Author: Yukie Ohta blogs about the history of SoHo at The SoHo Memory Project (sohomemory.com) and is writing a memoir about growing up in SoHo in the 1970s. Ohta is Editor-In-Chief at New York Bound Books, an online resource dedicated to all things New York for readers and writers.

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Cover photo by Will Ellis



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