

# Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art closes this month

The collectors behind the gallery have withdrawn their support

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## Lake Worth, Florida

The cultural-minded philanthropists who founded the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art (PBICA) in 2000 and have been its sole funders are pulling the plug on their fledgling Kunsthalle. Robert and Mary Montgomery have decided that the current international survey of emerging artists, “I feel mysterious today”, which closes on 27 March, will be the institution’s last. “It’s costing so much money to have so few people walk through the doors that it’s not feasible to keep it open”, says Mr Montgomery, a local attorney. He estimates that he has spent \$7.5 million on the PBICA over the last few years. The gallery’s annual budget ranged from \$1.3 to \$1.5 million and it has cost around \$100,000 a month to run.

Despite a well-regarded exhibition programme that has included shows such as “Brooklyn!”, an exhibition of contemporary works by 86 artists of the New York borough (2004), and the first US museum surveys of the Chicago-born Sue Williams (2002) and the Slovenian Marjetica Potrc (2004), attendance has been modest, reflecting the lack of interest in contemporary art in the immediate area. Since last year when word of the museum’s imminent closure emerged, the institution has attracted fewer than two dozen visitors per week.

Mr and Mrs Montgomery bought the building housing the PBICA from Palm Beach Community College in 1999. It came with a collection of over 1,000 decorative art and craft objects, assembled by the late entrepreneur J. Patrick Lannan.

The PBICA's first director was the New York-based freelance writer and experimental theatre artist Michael Rush. When he was hired in July 2000, he immediately sold the craft collection to a private collector in Miami on behalf of the Montgomerys and then set about organising the PBICA to become a viable nonprofit organisation. "I refined the institution's mission, hired the staff, set the curatorial policy, and put together a board of directors", Mr Rush told The Art Newspaper.

"The problem was that the Montgomerys never relinquished ownership of the institution to the directors who would have led it, as a non-profit organisation, to its next phase of development." He says the board was to gradually take over fiduciary responsibility from the Montgomerys over a period of three to five years, but in April 2004 they decided their philanthropic interests lay elsewhere.

Some observers have speculated that the Montgomerys bailed out when they could no longer write off the PBICA as a tax loss, but the couple remain the primary financial supporters of the Palm Beach Opera and other non-profit organisations in the area, and could have continued to fund the PBICA had they wished to do so. Instead, they asked Mr Rush to find a local museum that would take it over as a satellite, but he declined and submitted his resignation. An interim manager was hired and Dominic Molon, associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, was contracted to curate the current show. The building and, the remaining works of art it came with, are now likely to be sold.

As one museum of contemporary art closes, another is about to open in nearby West Palm Beach. The semi-retired neurologist and collector from Baltimore, Marvin Mordes, is in the final stages of converting a lakeside warehouse into some 16,000 square-feet of galleries and living space to open in May or June and display a rotating selection of around 250 works of contemporary art. It will be open to the public free of charge by

appointment. Its collection includes the work of German photographs such as the Bechers, Gursky, Ruff and Struth; sculpture by Anish Kapoor and Richard Long; videos by Piploitti Rist and Isaac Julien.

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