

# Drop in to the Marlene Yu Museum in Shreveport

Give credit where credit is due for an artist working to make a difference in



Neil Johnson

## EYE ON ART

Specialists. Stephanie and Bryan met, fell in love, married and, through this melding of two families, brought Marlene and James Yu into our community.

I just attended the first anniversary party of the opening of the Marlene Yu Museum. I am impressed with the work, vision, ambition, and determination of Marlene Yu, her family, and those who have supported her.

This artist has been painting for a half century now as a pioneer in environmental (nature) art. She has created over 4,000 works.

No, Marlene and James do not live here. They live in New York City where James is a real estate developer and Marlene has a studio where she creates her paintings that sometimes run 30 feet or more. But, trust me, they come here often.

Shreveport. Credit love. I refer to Stephanie Yu Lusk, headstrong daughter of Marlene and James Yu, and her marriage to Dr. Bryan Lusk of Lusk Eye



A panoramic view of the Marlene Yu Museum.

NEIL JOHNSON

It's funny how life throws surprise parties now and then. In the "Who'da Think It" department, who would have imagined that the old architecturally marvelous downtown Shreveport YWCA building, which closed its doors in 2010, would reopen and be resurrected as, not just a massive and beautiful art museum, but as the headquarters of an art institute? The Rainforest Art Institute's stated mission is "to increase the appreciation of nature through art."

This neck of the woods is still getting its community head around this woman and her museum—and the family's foundation. It's taken over a year of hearing about the purchase of the YWCA building by the foundation and the subsequent renovation, then its opening and year-long series of baby steps. But

I am here to tell you to go stick your head in there.

You already know where it is. 710 Travis Street. The old YWCA Building. Stick your head in and bring your memories with you. Memories of kids learning to swim in the basement pool, meetings, theater on its small stage, water aerobics, several small restaurants in the front room, yoga and exercise classes. Then memories of a courageous battle to keep the place open when the Y used it as a sanctuary and refuge for abused women. A safe haven from life-threatening situations. But the money was not there. At least not enough. It's a pretty big building. It sat empty from 2010 until the Yus bought it in mid-2013.

Of course the building has been drastically changed. Bring your memories and walk through, but celebrate

that the building was not allowed to fall victim to the wrecker's ball. It was on that path. Believe me. Not any more.

Go on. Admit it. You've been scratching your head about this museum since you first heard about it. An artist came down from New York City with big, big plans. She and James hail originally from Taiwan with a decidedly un-Louisiana name. Marlene's work is abstract and she and her art exist to fight for the preservation of the beauty of nature. She and her husband buy an endangered landmark building, renovate it, and open an art gallery on a scale downtown has not seen before. After a rich history of classic YWCA activities, its recent history of the place is fairly sad and complex and some can't get past the fact that it would have been better had the YW-

CA survived in its historic home.

Okay. Accept the above and let's all move on. I say let's welcome Marlene and James Yu with open arms and be thankful that Bryan settled here with Stephanie. The Yus are good and gracious people that have brought intelligence and passion and creativity to downtown Shreveport. They have created a base for a foundation with an excellent purpose.

Stephanie Yu Lusk, who runs the foundation, and Bryan Lusk share a passion for whitewater kayaking. Their dream is to take the old pool and turn it into a training pool

for kayaking skills. Some may say, "Wait! Flat Louisiana with its slow rivers and lazy bayous have no whitewater rapids." I respond with the fact that we have long had SCUBA diving schools here. Learn skills here. Use them elsewhere.

The plan is to put in a rock-climbing wall and other facilities that will train children and adults for a variety of outdoor activities.

Last week was an exciting week for the Marlene Yu Museum. The anniversary events filled it with live music, scrumptious food, and art in its several galleries, including one that used to be a gym, and now boasts a number of Marlene's gigantic paintings. Other galleries show both her works and the work of other artists, both local and far afield. But, more importantly, the place was filled with people.

Do yourself and nature a favor. Drop into the Marlene Yu Museum. You may want to then go from inside to outside. That's where you generally find most nature.

The galleries are free with a suggested donation of \$10.