Forget the image of an art museum as an aloof, ivory-tower institution. With today’s outreach programming and often provocative exhibitions, that picture is outdated. Now the California Museum of Art Thousand Oaks (CMATO) has gone a step further. A few weeks ago, the burgeoning institution relocated to its new home in The Oaks mall, with expanded galleries and a range of possibilities for the future.

To allow for growth until long-term plans for a freestanding museum can be realized, the board worked out a strategic partnership with the Macerich-owned property for a 5,500-square-foot area between Nordstrom and Macy’s. The move has wonderful benefits, notes Tish Greenwood, CMATO’s executive director. For starters, there’s the space itself: “The place is gorgeous,” she says. It has wood floors, good lighting, and room for offices and galleries for exhibitions of photography, painting, sculpture, new media, and installations. As for location, “being in a mall is perfect,” Greenwood adds. “We want to demystify the museum experience. It’s so accessible, and there’s no charge for admission.” (Donations are suggested.)

In planning the inaugural exhibit at The Oaks, Greenwood was prompted by stories about Jungleland, an animal theme park that was part of Thousand Oaks history decades ago. *Collection of Rarities* includes 13 whimsical yet serious paintings by contemporary Colorado artist Kevin Sloan that touch on the ways we interact with wildlife against a rapidly changing environmental landscape. Images such as a porcelain-patterned elephant balancing on a world globe, for example, hint at these animals’ fragile condition despite their size and apparent strength.

Two of the paintings were created specifically for this exhibit. When Sloan learned that Jungleland had giant tortoises that children could ride on, he created *96 Springs*. “Tortoises can live to be 150 years old, and the painting is about something long-lived, covered with candles like a birthday cake. It’s an image of hope and perseverance,” he says. His *Safe Haven* focuses on swan boats, like those that also were part of Jungleland. Sloan says that his work “points quietly toward something in peril, but it’s not explicit. It’s of the moment, but not topical. It’s bigger than that.”

Greenwood, who joined CMATO in 2016, anticipates that the paintings will appeal to both adults and children on different levels, and she has >
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complemented them with additional programming that draws on contributions by local artists in other media: Several poets give voice to the subject of Sloan’s paintings, and there’s an interactive installation by Karen Payton called _Forest of Wishes_.

Greenwood is already planning the exhibit for next spring and summer, which she says will be a total about-face: “Risk, a local graffiti artist, will produce a beyond-the-streets show that promises to be a total blockbuster,” she says. Meanwhile CMATO’s new facility represents the latest step in the institution’s evolution.

“The concept to bring a museum to Thousand Oaks had been around a long time,” says Tony Principe, chairman of the board, adding that plans had been very vague, with no specific location. A few years ago, the board negotiated an agreement for a site in front of Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, and the city donated the use of the former Taco Bell building there.

“We remodeled the building, created gallery and administrative spaces, and hired Tish as executive director,” Principe says. “She started filling the space with exhibits and programs, and we went from a conceptual museum to an actual museum open to the public.” Then, looking to the future, the board considered building a full-scale museum, but the daunting price tag led them to plan more modest phased construction on the Taco Bell site instead.

As it turned out, the city had different ideas, but CMATO was able to capitalize on its momentum and come up with the alternative at The Oaks. “This made sense,” says Principe. “The Oaks has a million visitors a year. The whole community goes there. There’s security, unlimited parking. It’s an opportunity to grow to the next level and get the community involved. The huge foot traffic is important for the museum and great branding for sponsors, who can hold events, screenings, and other programming.

“This is not a stuffy museum,” he says. “It’s about people coming in and having meaningful encounters with art. We want to increase awareness, attendance, and participation. We hope people will join as members, volunteers, and donors. There are all kinds of opportunities.”

Says Greenwood, “A museum is one of the last places where people of different backgrounds and social classes come together. CMATO is a place where ideas are shared and people connect.”

_**CMATO is open Wednesday through Sunday, 12 p.m. to 7 p.m.; cmato.org. Collection of Rarities is on view through February 17, 2019.**_