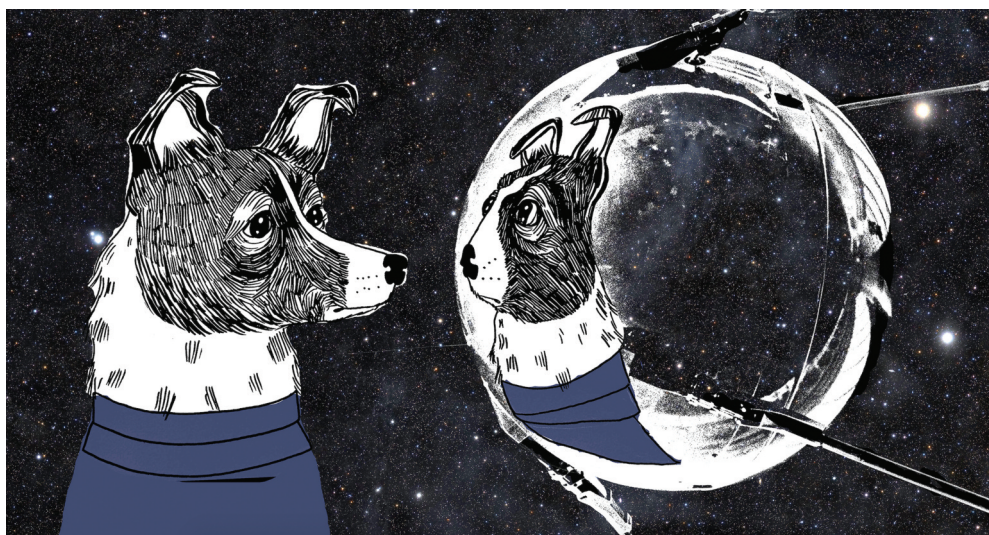


PORTLAND

What qualities best behoove a curator of Northwest art?



What becomes a curator most? That's a nuanced question in Portland, Oregon, these days, with the departure of an important veteran curator and the arrival—if only temporary—of a curator new to Oregon. Portland Art Museum's curator of Northwest art, Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson, is retiring on June 30 after a six-year tenure that capped an illustrious career as one of the region's preeminent art historians. Having spent 10 years working at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, six years at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, and nine years at museums in Montana before taking on what she has called her "dream job" at PAM, Laing-Malcolmson has become a walking, breathing lexicon of Northwest historical and living artists. Now that she's leaving the museum to resume her painting and sculpting practice after a decades-long detour into arts administration, the museum faces the difficult task of replacing her. A national search began several months ago, with the application period scheduled to close in July. PAM's executive director, Brian Ferriso, hopes to have the position filled by early fall. "Whoever they choose," Laing-Malcolmson reflects, "I would advise them to learn as much as they can about the living and historical artists of the region, to get out and travel around Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, looking at museums and galleries and visiting artists' studios, especially in the less urban areas."

That imperative—to ferret out worthwhile work being made outside metropolitan centers—is central to the strategy of another curator currently making a sizable blip on the Portland radar, Michelle Grabner. The Chicago-based artist and curator is helming Portland 2016 (July 9 – September 18), the fourth biennial exhibition mounted by the Disjecta Contemporary Art Center. Grabner, who notably co-curated the 2014 Whitney Biennial, is diversifying the Disjecta exhibition to a degree never before attempted by the nonprofit. In addition to the flagship exhibition in Disjecta's soaring north-Portland headquarters and nine other venues elsewhere in Portland, there will be satellite shows throughout Oregon, including in Ashland, Astoria, Bend, Clatskanie, La Grande, Madras, McMinnville, Pendleton, Roseburg, Salem, The Dalles, and the Umatilla Indian Reservation. No quadrant of the state will be ignored in this diffuse aesthetic emporium. Twenty-five different venues will showcase artwork by 34 artists and artist teams working across a broad range of media, among them installation, film/video, sound, painting, craft, and social practice.

"I was surprised on a couple levels on what I discovered in the Pacific

Northwest," Grabner reflects. "It was always a bit of a blind spot for me. In my unknowingness, I had thought the Portland ethos permeated the whole state. So it was really exciting to travel around and explore this composite of extraordinary landscapes: the coast, the high desert, the forests; to see the differences and witness the idiosyncratic ways the art practices are shaped by the landscape."

This year's biennial is an important step for Disjecta, says executive director Bryan Suereth, who has been inching the exhibition toward progressively greater diversity, geographic and otherwise, since its first iteration in 2010. He believes that bringing in outside curators to guide the artist-selection process is key to this strategy: "The critical vantage of an outside voice tends to distill our own clouded judgments. It keeps things fresh and spurs artists to push themselves... Engaging curators with deeper national connections can also help elevate the work being done here and draw interest from a wider network that hopefully leads to more media coverage and opportunities for the artists."

Of course, Disjecta's strategy could potentially backfire. Decentralizing the biennial across so many venues across Oregon might have a diluting effect. Likewise, PAM's pick for succeeding Laing-Malcolmson—if it's someone without her encyclopedic knowledge of the region—might compromise the museum's commitment to the Pacific Northwest's aesthetic heritage in the name of new blood. So what becomes a curator most? Perhaps it's an alloy of regional and globalist sensibilities that is as ideal as it is elusive.

—RICHARD SPEER

LEFT TO RIGHT:
"LAIKA'S LULLABY," 2015
Julia Oldham, VIDEO STILL FROM ANIMATION REEL

"No Title," 2015, Michael Lazarus
ACRYLIC PAINT AND FOUND OBJECTS ON WOOD, 39" x 9" x 1½"
PHOTOS: COURTESY THE ARTISTS