
The new guard

Contributed by Kris Vagner

Can Reno's two hip new community-minded curators help un-fragment the Northern Nevada art world?

By Kris Vagner, 10-31-06

(Photo: Reno hipsters at the Neverender, courtesy of the gallery)

In a crumbling parking lot behind two antique stores in Reno, a reception table is decked with crinkle-cut veggies and cubes of pepper jack. It's the annual summer party at the (con)Temporary Gallery, which, technically, is not a gallery. No white walls. No roof. It's a collective effort among artists, led by muralist Erik Burke, to transform a nondescript alley into artists' canvas using paint, performance art, music and neon.

In a comfortable studio out where suburbia tapers off into wilderness, basketmaker Mary Lee Fulkerson weaves locally gathered materials with synthetic ones. Willow branches and plastic cord make a sleek-looking column whose design is based as much on modern graphics as it is on traditional craft.

At Neverender, a small gallery near downtown owned by a young photographer, hipsters in military caps sip PBR in the back room and buy each other's paintings on the layaway plan. The front room is a boutique, where sales of handmade clothing and jewelry pay the rent.

These are typical scenes in Reno's art world, where creativity flourishes on a grass-roots level, individual artists forge ahead with their work whether they know it or not, and those who eventually make the big-time tend to do so elsewhere.

There's a lot going on here. We have first-class creative thinkers and good teachers. We have a thriving folk-arts scene, accomplished landscape painters and a handful of nationally known contemporary artists. We have one long-lived commercial gallery, Stremmel Gallery, that thrives on a balance of good taste and marketability, selling high-ticket work by mostly out-of-town artists to mostly out-of-town buyers. A decade-long lineage of smaller, artist-funded galleries operated by the skin of their teeth. Bleu Lion, Chapter House, Fireplace and Icon displayed adventurous local artwork that yielded few sales but drew enthusiastic audiences.

Despite the perpetual activity and the willing audiences, the Reno art scene, so far, has not exceeded the sum of its parts. Even though ambition and talent abound, the scene is marked by a streak of Nevada provincialism. But that's more out of practicality than a lack of interest in the rest of the world. We simply don't have a lot of venues for contemporary artwork.

Enter two new curators who are stretching the venue potential of two large Reno institutions. Both are young women imported from art-world metropolises. Each brings a refreshing mix of scholarliness and populism to a town that's ready for it.

Marjorie Vecchio, the new director of the University of Nevada, Reno's Sheppard Gallery, and Ann Wolfe, the Nevada Museum of Art's new curator, are both poised to help capitalize on the artistic momentum that's been gaining here for decades.

Vecchio started at Sheppard this fall. She's taught photography in Chicago, curated exhibits in New York and recently received a PhD from the European Graduate School in Switzerland.

"I'm a completely dedicated, obsessed interdisciplinarian," she says. As a curator, she's asked a photographer to work with a poet; she's paired a robot maker with a fashion designer.

These seemingly random partnerships aren't just exercises in absurdity. They're a symbol of Vecchio's penchant for exploring the possibilities of a community.

"I come to curating from the perspective of an artist and a teacher," she says. "It's about making connections between people who might have things in common at the idea level rather than just the art-only level. It's about facilitating connections."

Making connections locally has been easy. She says, "I'm just tapping into something that's already going on." She's arrived at a good time to forge larger-scale collaborations too. The UNR art department started offering an MFA in fine arts this semester, a likely draw for artists visiting from elsewhere. Vecchio has invited colleagues from out of town to lecture at UNR, and she dreams of establishing program where artists come to town for a semester to work.

Vecchio foresees Reno finding its stride as a town with a happening contemporary art scene, albeit one that's differently flavored than your typical metropolis. She notes a strong work ethic among her undergrad students as a likely contributing factor. Another is our geography. On one hand, our wide-open spaces will continue to appeal to creative types from crowded places. "Serious artists who need headspace and an interesting environment will come for a while," Vecchio predicts. (The landscape factored in to her own decision to move here.) On the other hand, she foresees that, as Reno's population grows, its rate of transience may well remain intact. But that doesn't strike her as an impediment to building a sustainable art scene.

Her take on mondo-scale coming and going? "That's the way cultures are working now. Artists don't just live in one location anymore. They travel for projects and for work. It's important for us to bank on that. It can leave you with some really rich experiences."

Ann Wolfe has been the curator of the Nevada Museum of Art since January. Before moving to Reno, she studied art history in Los Angeles and worked as assistant curator at the San Jose Museum of Art.

She hasn't yet curated an exhibit in the museum's main gallery—they're scheduled a year or two in advance—but her thoughtful selections from the museum's permanent collection hang in two of the museum's smaller galleries. Her arrangements reveal a light-handed academic touch that invites viewers to draw their own conclusions.

"Take Western art," she explains, referring to a small exhibit in which she hung a few pieces from the NMA's 600-piece collection of "altered landscape" (read: "decidedly unromantic") photographs. "You can look at it in a new way. It might not be traditional in the sense that it celebrates the West; you can look at all the complexity and incongruity about the West."

A generalist at heart, Wolfe comes off as a studious egalitarian. She's as closely attuned to traditional artwork as she is to the cutting edge. Over the last few weeks, she's traveled to Tuscarora to meet rural artists and to San Jose for the opening of an exhibit she curated that focuses on the most modern of topics: suburban sprawl.

Wolfe's prediction for Reno's future: With the museum's help, the varied art communities that already exist here will become better connected with each other. She says, "One thing I've noticed is there is an established arts community here, and in all communities, particularly where suburban growth is expanding quickly, there's always that subculture that exists where artists feel left behind [or like their work is not] welcome in a

museum. She'd like to develop closer ties to the area's Latino artists, for example, and the museum routinely lets down its hair these days to host belly dancers, fire spinners and a Burning Man fashion parade.

"I didn't come to Reno to change the community she says. "I came to build upon the successes and the excitement that already exist."

Kris Vagner, your friendly Northern Nevada arts correspondent, is also an artist, and therefore dangerously well connected for a journalist. Kris has shown artwork at Neverender Gallery, was part-owner of Fireplace Gallery, and is Artist in Residence for Capital City Arts Initiative, an organization in which Erik Burke holds the same title.