



10 Qs

with JOY ARMSTRONG

"We are not typical as far as museums go because we are not just a museum."

As curator of modern and contemporary art at the Fine Arts Center, Joy Armstrong is a critical piece of the FAC's mission to push the boundaries of what it means to be a museum and extend the artistic experience outside of gallery exhibitions. In addition to a modern and contemporary art branch the FAC includes the Bemis School of Art, The IDEA space, and a performing arts program. Armstrong most recently headed the FAC's collaboration with graffiti artist El Mac in the "Aerosol Exalted" exhibition. Armstrong has a notable connection to Colorado Springs as she grew up in the 80903 and travelled up I-25 to attend the University of Denver for her undergraduate degree. Armstrong sat down with Editor-in-Chief David Andrews at the Fine Arts center to discuss the merits of the arts in society at large, connections that can be drawn between visual art and other forms of creative expression, as well as the recently announced merger between CC and the FAC.

INTERVIEW BY DAVID ANDREWS
PHOTO BY AARON CRONIN

THE CATALYST: Does art make the world a more hospitable place? What does art do for people? What have you seen it do, if anything, during your time at the FAC?

JOY ARMSTRONG: "Hospitable is an interesting choice of word. I think that art at its best should be provocative and that's not to say that it should be controversial, but it should provoke some sort of reaction, and the best art does. In that regard, the world obviously would not be what it is without our cultural history and art history. That ability that art has to bring people together in a shared experience and provoke some sort of dialogue, even if it's something that you don't like on a superficial level, hopefully it will elicit some sort of response that will create conversation between human beings, which will lead to the world being a more accepting and understanding place by opening those paths of communication in a different way than many people are typically used to."

TC: Is there some exhibit or installation that you have worked on that did that noticeably more than other ones? An exhibit where people were coming in and having an extreme reaction.

JA: "A year ago, working with El Mac, who was the graffiti artist from Los Angeles and Fuse, who is a Colorado Springs based graffiti artist. Bringing in their work, at least in my years here at the Fine Arts Center, was something that people weren't expecting to see in the galleries, it offered a completely different type of experience. The subject material was something that was very different and I think it offered people a chance to expand their expectations of what fine art should be."

We had a fantastic corresponding event with that exhibition called JAM FAC, that we're hoping to bring back next year. The event just brought people into the building that had never been here before. That specifically brought in so many people that have never been here before and may never had come otherwise, and they had a fantastic time and hopefully felt like the museum was a more open and less sort of elite environment where they could enter and experience something and not feel intimidated."

TC: Which piece of art or art experience was formative for you in childhood/teenage/college years?

JA: "The very first thing that comes to mind, that feels especially poignant to me now, because we had some of her work here this summer, but when I was an undergraduate student at DU was when I first became exposed to or was aware of Cindy Sherman's work. My background up to

that point and after that point was largely performance more than visual art, until I got to college. Her work crossed that line for me. The series, her first series, which she became really well-known for the "untitled" film stills which felt like this perfect blend of performance and visual fine art and really encapsulated this concept of identity, which is something I would continue to be really interested in. Playing a role and how that impacts our day-to-day lives as well as in a theatrical sense."

TC: Does the FAC's physical location affect the museum's exhibitions and identity as a space?

JA: "Yes, it definitely does, especially when you look at the history of the Fine Arts Center. Almost 100 years ago we started as the Broadmoor Art Academy. In the 19-teens and 1920s we were a professional and academic academy so people came here from all over the country and all over the world, and that was largely influenced by our geographic location."

Clearly we have a beautiful environment, we have scenery to die for that you can't experience anywhere else in the world and there was a time where the Fine Arts Center, because of this great location, was really the biggest thing happening in the American art scene west of the Mississippi."

TC: How does the FAC plan to interact with the Colorado Springs community beyond gallery viewing in the coming months or years?

JA: "We do hopefully have another Jam coming up. The Fine Arts Center outside of the gallery setting there is always something else going on here, from arts classes, to live theater, other types of live performance through our SaGaji Theater and our professional performing arts department. Whenever possible, and we have a lot of it coming up this year."

We bring in the artist along with their exhibition, so people can have the experience of listening to artists talk about their work, which is unquestionably the best way to learn about the art, which is to have access to the artist directly. Obviously, with the new relationship with Colorado College I expect to see new types of unusual events and special occasions happening here that hopefully people will continue to come in for. We are always working to expand what we do and offer something different to people that might not think an art exhibition is for them or might not think live theater is for them."

TC: Does your undergraduate education at DU shape the way you view your work today? Which lessons do you rely

on from DU?

JA: "Something that was invaluable about my experience at DU, which is probably really similar to your experience at CC was that, when I was there, I don't quite know what the student body looks like now, there were about 300 students, so it's small and once you get past all your initial coursework and make it to your major studies, the classes are very intimate and you have a great opportunity to get to know people who are interested in the same type of things that you're interested in and have relationships with your professors. So for me, that was something early on, being able to be in these classes where it's sometime eight or 10 or 12 people, and sometimes the same people quarter to quarter at DU, that for me really shaped this notion of working collaboratively and cooperatively which continues to be the way I prefer to work, to have the opportunity to develop close relationships, whether it's with my colleagues or whether it's with an artist that I'm exhibiting, but not to feel like I'm in a vacuum."

TC: How does visual art coincide or connect, if at all, with the hard sciences? Did growing up with an artist-scientist father shape your view of this connection?

JA: "For me, they're inseparable. The experience of creative endeavors, whether it's writing or visual art or music or whatever it might be, movement, it's a type of activity that whether you're working in the hard sciences or anywhere else it's that creative thought and that ability to not think about things the way they've always been thought about but, to be open to trying new things, and to investigate the world as you experience it, whether you are going for hard numbers in some regard or whether it's literally a visual representation of something you have experienced in the world. I don't think the hard sciences would exist without the type of creative thought that we think of as belonging to artists."

TC: Colorado Springs is not a bustling arts community like New York or Chicago or LA. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a smaller arts community?

JA: "Colorado Springs, even in the time I've been here, about seven years, and having grown up here has blossomed in ways that I never would have imagined. For a city our size I think that we do have a bustling arts scene. In terms of thinking about Colorado Springs compared to New York or Chicago, LA, major European cities we have a distinct advantage in that most of us that work in the arts and are passionate about the community and are

immersed in the culture of this city have the opportunity to know each other and work together and be able to reach out to each other and collaborate on things in the city and across disciplines. For me, the intimacy of the Springs' arts community is an asset, definitely. I think that we continue to struggle with preconceived notions of what Colorado Springs is outside of our community. Even just thinking about people not acknowledging the work that is being done here or knowing who we are or what's possible here. So that's something we're struggling against. New York, those big cities, they've got the respect, Colorado Springs, we're working to get the respect."

TC: Do you have a piece of advice or wisdom to share with Studio Art majors at CC or those interested in entering museum work one day?

JA: "I'd say that the best thing that could have happened for me was having the opportunity to be involved. It's a professional career path where there aren't a ton of job opportunities, but the more experience you can have the more you can get in and have hands-on opportunities where, when you graduate, you know how to hang a painting and you know how to use power tools."

They sound like really basic skills but all of those skills go a long way. A lot of that is volunteer work for a long time. Anywhere you can get in and get practical experience, while you're still a student, I think is the best advice. For me, primarily that was at Kent State. I had the opportunity after my first year to, rather than being a teaching assistant, I got an assistantship working in the gallery as the Assistant Director of the gallery. It was trial by fire, there were five exhibition spaces, things were constantly changing, so you had to be constantly moving."

TC: How have you enjoyed spending time with the arts as of late? What books, music, and art have you been sustaining you?

JA: What a lovely question. My nightstand always has about four books on it. Currently I've been reading a Colorado Springs author, actually. "Postcards From a Dead Girl" is what the book is called, by Kurt Farbar. That's been fun, it's been a really enjoyable read. I love fiction but I also love history and another one of the books that's always on my nightstand is about art usually. Currently, it's about curation by kind of a rockstar international curator. There's usually a book about Buddhism, an interest of mine as well. In terms of reading, that's what I'm loving at the moment."