

La Jolla museum first major stop in curator's ascent

By Robert L. Pincus
PHOTO BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS

PITTSBURGH — A Thursday night gala for the 1999 Carnegie International is behind her and the Carnegie prize has been awarded. But on Friday morning, an array of museum directors and curators are still in town and will be viewing the exhibition.



MADELEINE GRYNSZTEJN

Large scale: Madeleine Grynsztejn included artists from four continents in this year's Carnegie International show.

Minutes before the doors open, the event's curator, Madeleine Grynsztejn, is trying to travel through the show before they arrive. That means she is virtually sprinting through the museum, calling out "operator" on her portable phone to get a video running and another staffer to adjust lights on a particular painting.

"You can simply hang a painting," says Grynsztejn, "but a video will haunt you if something isn't right." If she seems more to a touchy-feel, it's not hard to understand why. Although the thin, elegantly dressed curator has more than a decade of experience as a curator, this is her most important project.

"The world is never as big as where you're doing an international art exhibition," she says. "I've learned a tremendous amount." Her education as a curator may have begun when she was an intern and then a Helena Rubenstein Fellow at New York's Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art in the mid-1980s. But her managerial position at a museum was in La Jolla. Grynsztejn was associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, from 1986 to 1992.

The most ambitious of several exhibitions she mounted during her tenure here was "La Frontera/The Border: Art About the Mexico/United States Border Experience" (1993). This wide-ranging effort was co-curated by Patricia Chavez of Balboa Park's Centro Cultural de la Raza and appeared at both the downtown space of the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Centro.

The exhibition was also part of a series of shows, publications and associated events, collectively called "Dos Ciudades/Two Cities" that Grynsztejn co-organized. And she was well-suited for the task. Grynsztejn, 37, earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in art history at American universities: Tulane and Columbia, respectively. But she is Peruvian-born and is fluent in Spanish.

By the time "La Frontera/The Border" opened, Grynsztejn had departed to become associate curator in the Department of Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. She was acting head of that department when she left to become curator of contemporary art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1997.

The chance to organize a Carnegie International was the big lure, of course. (She had Armstrong, also a one-time curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, did the previous version in 1995 and had become director of the Carnegie Museum of Art.)

"It was an opportunity not only to curate an exhibition of enormous stature," says Grynsztejn, "but it's the only show with more than a 100-year legacy." It has been "an extraordinary experience," she adds.

The largest precedent for the Carnegie International was a wide-ranging project she curated in Chicago: "About Place: Recent Art of the Americas" (1995).

But there are valuable lessons she gleaned even earlier from "La Frontera/The Border" that apply to her current project. "It was enormously valuable because it taught me a great deal about negotiating across different cultures and different institutions."

The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, was also a great training ground in other ways. "It has always been a catalyst for new work by artists," she says. "A pre-eminent example is Jeff Wall. We showed him in depth and commissioned a new work. And now, years later, I've had the chance to work more closely with him (for the Carnegie)."

While in La Jolla, she also got to know Ann Hamilton, who is exhibiting a gorgeous work in Pittsburgh called "wells." (Hamilton had a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, in 1990.) Grynsztejn is clearly moved by Pittsburgh's attachment to the Carnegie International. Since the exhibition opened to the public Nov. 6, there have been 23,000 visitors.

"You have grandparents bringing their grandchildren, and the grandparents' grandparents first brought them to it. There really is a sense of ownership the city has for the show."

Carnegie

Judicious use of the handsome complex

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portals cut into the gallery walls. You scratch your head in wonder that the whole thing doesn't come toppling down.

Grynsztejn makes much of the characteristics that her work shares with the networks of the World Wide Web, being extraordinarily complex, nonhierarchical, decentralized. Yet it's the intensely material nature of her works that distinguish them.

In fact, in this millennial version of the Carnegie International, you can see one source of art's salvation in the 21st century. Digital technology will surely expand the tools available to the visual artist in ways we can't anticipate. But art of an intensely physical nature — be it sculpture, installation or some other genre — will always offer irreplaceable pleasures. There is an intrinsic desire for such work, seemingly encoded in our genes.

Out with ideology
Along with this emphasis on art in all its physicality, is an accompa-

nying distrust of ideology, be it political or aesthetic. Nowhere to be found is the statement art of the late '80s and early '90s. Well, almost nowhere. Kara Walker's silhouettes, a familiar quantity in museums these days, appear once again in the Carnegie Museum.

Walker does them large, placing them directly on walls. They are quasi-Victorian and look right at home in the museum's sculpture court, fronted by Neoclassical sculptures so in tune with 19th-century taste. Walker's figures refer to both 18th-century stag-styles of African-Americans and to life under slavery. Her work elicits a wonderfully acidic charge on the first few viewings, but their edge dulls over time. She's an emerging artist who suffers from overexposure, and you just have to hope that she can develop while in the spotlight.

The modernist vision of architecture, with its grand plan for an archetypal domestic architecture for worker and tycoon alike, is slyly chided in Jeff Wall's most recent photographs. The locale is the Mies van der Rohe Foundation in Barcelona, an homage to the early 20th-century architect. But the only role for the worker, as pictured here, is as cleaning person. He is scrubbing

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