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Events
Quilt Week
LaFontsee
Galleries

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Artistic Curation

Two leaders in Grand Rapids' fine art scene share the ins and outs of choosing pieces for a venue.

BY BRI KILROY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TWO EAGLES MARCUS

An artist creates a piece with something in mind, translating thoughts and emotions to brushstrokes that harmonize to communicate what the artist wants the viewer to see. A curator organizes art pieces in an exhibition or gallery, leaving the infinite interpretations to the mind of the viewer as he or she observes it among its neighboring paintings.

While visiting Grand Rapids' abundance of museums, galleries and art exhibits, it's easy to get lost in the artwork itself; however, where and how art is displayed is as crucial as the colors, mood or subject matter of the piece. To explore the attention art pieces demand even after they're created, we met with Chief Curator at Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM), Ron Platt, and Co-owner of LaFontsee Galleries, Linda LaFontsee, who explained the curating process in choosing art for an exhibit. Read the following Q&A to discover the considerations that occur beyond the final stroke and how both curators approach their work.

WLM: How would you describe the style of your venue given the art that's displayed?

Platt (GRAM): We see ourselves as a community museum that is always looking to engage with our current audience and reach more people through our exhibitions and related programs. We exhibit a lot of different kinds of art and design ... GRAM's building at Monroe Center has great versatility for presenting these objects in a lot of unique and engaging ways.

LaFontsee (LaFontsee Galleries): LaFontsee Galleries is a 30-year-old contemporary art gallery representing over 50 regional and national artists and sculptors, emerging and established. The work is varied and very well done.

What are your job duties and responsibilities?

Platt: I oversee exhibitions at the museum, whether they are artworks from our own permanent collection or shows brought together for a two or three-month period. We aim to be responsive to our community and audience—a very diverse group of people with wide-ranging tastes and interests. My department also acquires art for GRAM's collection, which includes about 7,500 objects and it's growing all the time.

LaFontsee: My tasks include choosing which artists to represent, meeting with artists to discuss their direction, consulting with designers or directly with clients, filling the van with art options and taking it to a space so it can be viewed in the actual environment, curating shows in both LaFontsee's Grand Rapids and Douglas locations and installing the work, designing framing with customers for artwork they have purchased from us or their own personal pieces and lastly, problem solving everything under the sun.

How do you decide which art is displayed in an exhibition/gallery?

Platt: We present several exhibitions each year, and we try to create a balanced program—I don't think anyone wants a steady diet of the same thing. I like the idea of turning people on to things they didn't know they liked. We are always looking to balance uniqueness, excellence and relevance as it relates to the communities desires and interests.

LaFontsee: Our exhibitions are typically comprised of the newest and best work that our artists have created.

What do you consider when curating an art exhibit?

Platt: There's a lot to consider. Each exhibit is special and requires the right tone and setting. Context is everything.

LaFontsee: It is extremely important how the work is placed, the space around it and what work is next to or near it. They clearly speak to one another, so it's critical to do it right. At times, it should be a harmonious relationship and other times juxtaposed with pieces to create intentional discord.

How do you create diversity in an exhibit that circles the same theme?

Platt: I feel that idea of diversity is built in to GRAM's mission; we try to reflect the diversity of our audience, our community and of the U.S. Our ArtPrize exhibition this year, for example, includes Grand Rapids artists as well as artists from Chicago, Texas, Los Angeles and Holland (the one in Europe). There's great age, ethnic and gender diversity as well—more women artists than men, as it turns out.

LaFontsee: Each artist is naturally diverse. They have their own vision and way of representing that.

What is the best part of your job?

Platt: Connecting people with art and getting to talk with an amazing range of individuals about art and what it means to them. I also work with an amazing group of people.

LaFontsee: Turning someone onto the value and importance of art.

The most challenging part?

Platt: Things like money, time and space.

LaFontsee: Not being able to turn someone onto the value and importance of art. I'm challenged when it's viewed as a manufactured product rather than the one of a kind piece that it is. Also being asked, "What's your best price on this?"

Is there a particularly memorable exhibit you set up that you loved working on?

Platt: Our current exhibition, The Collection in Context, was great fun. Forty people were invited to write about different works of art in the exhibition, and we are displaying their contributions alongside the art. It celebrates this variety of perspectives within the community and lets everyone know that there is no "correct" way to think or feel about art and that everyone's opinion is valid and interesting.

LaFontsee: One of the most heartfelt memories was LaFontsee's first exhibition of the work that was created by various young students for the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital. Seeing the pride and emotion in those kids' eyes and their families was so satisfying. Learning their stories about their experiences with the hospital meant a great deal to everyone working on the project.



Ron Platt, Chief Curator at GRAM

Why do art museums/galleries exist?

Platt: We need public settings where people can look, learn about and discuss art and creativity. Museums, like GRAM, that collect art are important to serve as containers of our own history and reflect the community around us.

LaFontsee: When just starting our business, Scott (*LaFontsee's husband and co-owner of LaFontsee Galleries*) and I met so many incredibly talented artists that didn't have anywhere to show their work. We felt it was so important that their work be shared and supported and we still do! Museums and galleries are there, waiting for art to be discovered. They should always welcome anyone to explore them.

What kind of art never fails to get a second glance from you?

Platt: I like art and design that is well made and is interesting to think about too.

LaFontsee: I'm always attracted to art that is repetitive and detailed; work that I wish I had made.

In the way a never before seen arrangement of art pieces can shift interpretation, the familiarity with curating process may alter your perspective of what a piece originally communicated. Visit GRAM (101 Monroe Center St. NW) and LaFontsee Galleries (833 Lake Drive SE, Grand Rapids or 410 West Center St., Douglas) and witness the way careful curation constructs a message.

“There are no winners or losers if someone created it.” - Linda LaFontsee, on artwork