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Lewis and Clark Gender Symposium
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A View to Women's Networks in the Arts in Portland: Building and Engaging an Audience for the Artist Rosemarie Beck

A necessary component to any successful cultural event is finding an attentive audience. This is one of the elements of support that I provided for the Rosemarie Beck art exhibit and multidisciplinary symposium. I initially assumed that that finding organizations, associations, and publications that focus on women and the arts would be a simple task. Though Portland is generally a progressive and artistic city, I had more difficulty locating such networks than I originally anticipated.

I began my search looking for feminist organizations in Portland. I quickly realized that aside from a few exceptions, these groups essentially do not exist in any public form. I moved toward researching women's clubs and resource centers and had more luck within these avenues. Many of these organizations offer support while encouraging and facilitating women's civic roles in society. Few groups explicitly state that they are interested in the arts, however many gather for various community events, and my understanding was that visiting an art exhibit fell under this category.

One facet I explored were the numerous synagogues that lie within the city limits. Historically, Jewish populations tend to employ a strong sense of community and I anticipated that many would demonstrate interest in the work of a Jewish artist whose embroideries are displayed at the Oregon Jewish Museum. Most of the synagogue websites I visited featured a link to the congregation's women's circles or sisterhood programs.

These groups gather in fellowship for various occasions and the Beck exhibit may be one of great curiosity.

Concentrating on the artistic significance of the exhibit, I added several Portland museums, shops, and local galleries to the contact list. In regard to the galleries, many of them seem to be very involved within the community and welcome opportunities to attend a local cultural event. A number of these galleries participate in the “First Thursday” gallery walk nights. A possible option to consider is adding the Beck exhibit to the gallery walk in April. It would be interesting to see what kind of response the exhibit received on this popular evening of the arts. Additionally, I included businesses that focus on fiber arts. I had quite a bit of success locating sewing, knitting and fabric shops whose staff and patrons may be interested in Beck’s embroideries. I rarely hear about fiber arts exhibits, so these artisans may be highly motivated to visit and potentially connect with other people active in that area.

On the advertising side of things, fortunately many of the local publications feature upcoming cultural events that occur within the city. Most of the newspapers and magazines allow for online or mailed submission of an event description that will be included in one or more of their issues. This was the case for cultural calendars like *Oregon Arts Watch* and the *Cascade Art & Entertainment*. The exhibition and March 5 symposium were featured in a short article in the March 3 online issue of *Oregon Arts Watch*, and were additionally included in the *Willamette Week* and *Portland Mercury*.

The new Broadway Gallery space in Lincoln Hall is highly accessible (including ADA compliant) and convenient for those who already find themselves near PSU’s campus. In addition to women and arts organizations, businesses, and publications I included the

contact information for relevant academic departments from Portland State University and several colleges and art schools nearby. At least for the symposium, this is where the majority of our audience derived. We determined this by utilizing a simple tally system at the door of the studio theater.

Student intern, Tabitha Hilweh, and myself led guided docent tours throughout the day of the symposium. A morning tour was provided for Freshman Inquiry classes and highlighted themes around “iconic” expressions of sexuality and The Body, and focused on three of Beck’s paintings from her “Lovers” series. Many of the students seemed slightly embarrassed or shy about the content of the tour and though the script was question driven, I received very few participatory remarks or answers. I determined that this was most likely due to the fact that the young audience did not feel confident enough in their knowledge to voice their interpretations in such a setting. I understood their plight and offered potential answers to my questions and received a sufficient supply of nods and “yeahs.”

The later tours were more saturated with members of the public and students from art history classes. I was surprised by the amount of questions raised about “Women Sewing” and Beck’s earlier “Le Maquillage” paintings that preceded the “Lovers” series. Here, Beck meditated on how women “make up” and perform various social roles. Fortunately, the morning session of last week’s symposium had prepared me well to answer these queries. PSU Gender and Sexuality Studies professor, Jamie Ross, had just given a talk entitled, “Antigone, Beck, and a Lesbian New Yorker.” I tied the questions about female social roles back into to Beck’s 1990s paintings that used the classic Greek

myth of Oedipus and his daughters/sisters Antigone and Ismene, and how Antigone is viewed as one of the first feminist representations.

Furthermore, I received an unforeseen amount of challenge questions and a push to explain myself further, especially in regard to my interpretations of the “Lovers” paintings, such as *Two with a Horse*. Some tour participants challenged my view of the depicted female as subjugated or controlled. When I pointed out that the couples’ feet were potentially poised for flight from the bedroom, one woman stated, “I was there in the 60s and can assure you, no one was running from anything.” All people read and interpret art differently; clearly the painting stirred up some emotion concerning the legacies of the sexual revolution. Though I was not sure how to respond to her comment, I appreciated her firsthand opinion.

Overall I think that the audience I attempted to attract was present for the exhibit tours. While it was PSU students who were the primary attendees, I was pleased that members of the public chose to participate as well. Though I’ve given plenty of presentations, and led several academic discussions, I learned that guiding a tour offers its own set of challenges. One must be ready to respond in situations where participants either have little to no involvement, or have questions/comments that I have no direct answer for. However, I realized that I was quicker on my feet than expected, pulling knowledge from past coursework and experiences. I was grateful for the opportunity to be placed in this position because I recognized my command over the material as well as the connection to public history. Public historians must strive to make a place, exhibit, or experience more accessible through interpretation. Therefore, I feel that the task of

building and engaging an audience for Rosemarie Beck was a valuable exercise to carry with me through my future studies and career as a public historian.