



The Portland Art Museum Podcast - Episode 2

SPEAKERS

Grace Kook-Anderson, Ryan Pierce



Grace Kook-Anderson 00:04

Hi, you're listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. On this first official episode, we're going to hear from Ryan Pierce, a Portland based artist featured in the current exhibition. The map is not the territory which is on view through May 5, 2019. My name is Grace Kook-Anderson and I'm the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art. I searched the Northwest for eight artists for this exhibition and found that Ryan's work masterfully captures our world through sharp and pregnant detail. If you've been to the exhibition you not only have seen his large paintings depicting flora and fauna, or the ruins of a strange cabinet of curiosities, but you may also have seen a short video about Ryan and his work as an artist and co founder of Signal Fire an organization that encourages artists to experience nature in ways that tap into their talents, what you're about to hear is the full audio from his interview, only emitting the voice of our interviewer and irrelevant bits of conversation relating to audio setup. We're waiting for the sounds of trucks and sirens to pass. relevant links will be in this episode's description. And a full transcript is available at PortlandArtMuseum.org/podcast. You will hear my voice from time to time but only when there is a shift in topics. Until then. This is Ryan Pierce.



Ryan Pierce 01:41

My name is Ryan Pierce. I live in Portland. I've been here for 20 years. I grew up in the redwoods and Northern California and I'm an artist and I'm also one of the CO directors of an arts organization called signal fire. Yeah, I was one of those kids who couldn't be

anything else. I was like always drawing and class when I was supposed to be paying attention and always had a rich, imaginative internal life. I studied art, formerly here in Portland, Oregon College of Art and Craft, and then went away to San Francisco to get an MFA in painting at California College of the Arts, CCA and I've been working professionally as an artist for about 20 years. Yeah, I've always been drawing and painting as long as I can remember. I think some of my my formative periods were kindergarten days, drawing people living on the moon, fourth grade, drawing knights and dragons in battle, maybe my high school years drawing a lot of dinosaurs with human bodies. The project that I'm involved in now I've been doing for about 12 or 13 years, and it's a project of depicting our world. In a increasingly climate change state, and so they're, they're recognizable scenes but they're a little bit accelerated in terms of the the drama of the weather and insinuations about the absence or presence of human society in a slightly different form. I think it started from a place of personal concern and just wanting to learn about how our planet was changing and compare that to my direct observations being, you know, being in the world. And I think it started out as sort of like a more of a science fiction project of imagining how people might be able to re inhabit the earth and a more sustainable way that was really a direct departure from the society that I was seeing around me, and then gradually as the evidence of climate Change has been more and more present in our day to day lives. The project has become less sci fi and more mundane, I guess. So this project is both a phase of this project is a long phase of my artistic development. And if it has a title, I would call it our dreams after sleeping for 1000 years. For the last 12 years, I've been depicting our world in various stages of accelerated climate change, and there's evidence of human habitation, but it's all implied. And the implication is that our president, society and governmental structure has collapsed that people are still around, but in a very reduced footprint. And that human society is really learning to live around the shape and the health of natural systems and that natural systems aren't And our sort of guiding the way that our species regenerates and learns to live on the earth. So within this larger project of depicting our world, and accelerated states of climate change, I also pursue sub projects like I did one called army of no one that we're all landscapes that have faced war sometime in the last century or so and depicting how those might recover with less human intervention. And then the project that I'm engaged in currently. I'm calling terra incognita. And that's the work selected for this exhibition. And that's really a project about the act of exploration and discovery, both the excitement of exploring the world and the problems inherent and doing so. And specifically looking to the Golden Age of Discovery as a time when Europeans were flooding into the Americas to the so called New World and excited to catalog every Bird and B and butterfly. But at the same time, you know, because of their racism and colonial mindset, we're erasing the indigenous knowledge that pre existed there. conquest. So the title, terra incognita comes from of Redeemer novel cop story, and if you haven't read his collected short stories, I heartily recommend them. It's about to European explorers

bumbling around in the swamps of some unnamed South American region and they're slowly going mad and they're hallucinating the comforts of European life like specifically the swirling pieces of an armoire or a wallpaper sample. And as they go mad and meet an unhappy ending, their sort of thirst for discovery is overwhelmed by their nostalgia for their comfortable life. Living in the northwest has influenced my work because I've been involved with environmental campaigns over the years, and I'm an avid hiker. And now that I run an outdoor organization, I actually spend at least three months a year living outside all over the American West. And so that has a really huge impact on my work, because I feel like direct observation of the natural world is kind of the singular most important thing to me as an artist as a researcher. So signal fire is an arts group that I co founded with an activist named Amy Harwood, 10 years ago, we've had 400 people involved over the years, and it's changed shape and brought in a lot of new leadership since then. But the premise from the very beginning was to get our artists and activists friends out to public lands to go camping and backpacking. together to get artists to fall in love with wild wild places, specifically on public lands, and get them to care about those places and advocate for them with their work. And also to bring it the other direction and convince activists and public lands, defenders, that there are open ended and creative ways that can influence their work and their campaigns and make them more effective. The creation of signal fire was inspired, I think, originally because we just wanted to trick our artists friends into going camping with us. And Amy and I were thinking, well, what if they don't have the time? Well, if we give it a name, and they can put it on their their CV, then they can call it a thing and say that they did it. And so yeah, that worked. The title of signal fire came from the idea of using art to advocate for wild places and sort of to raise an alarm around something. And we also both hate acronyms.

G Grace Kook-Anderson 09:04

One thing that I'm always curious about and you'll hear this in all of the artists interviews from the map is not the territory is who the artists consider to be their mentors.

R Ryan Pierce 09:15

Some of my mentors over the years have been my teachers at Oregon College of Art and Craft, which was a really positive experience for me. So local artists like Michelle Ross and Georgiana Neil and Bill will, I would also count them on my mentors, sort of my adult artist friends that I've met since moving back to Portland after grad school, I would be like Mark Smith and MK Guth, people who've been really good advocates. For me as an emerging artist in this community. This community has always felt really close and non competitive. And there's just a sense of mutual support in the northwest that has been really positive for me as an artist. And then now That I'm you know, in my old age, I think my artists,

peers and my past students are also increasing, you know, increasingly inspiring me and teaching me about how to maintain ambition and, and rigor in my own work. I think that my entire working practice could be grouped around the idea of responding to curiosity to my own personal curiosity about the natural world about the ways that human culture has been shaped by and that human actions continue to shape the natural world. And so whether I'm exploring that through visual art, or through writing or through coercing other people to Trump around in the landscape and read about it, all the things kind of circle back to this new These underlying questions that I personally have my process as an artist begins with some kernel of curiosity and our research thread. I'm really influenced by literature. I read a lot of fiction. And I do a lot of walking around and wild places in the West. And whether it's a title or just kind of a hunch that then germinates into a series of images. I usually work in pretty distinct projects and give them titles and will begin and end the body of work sometimes working on multiple ones at the same time, whether that's a body of paintings or sometimes I do these like interactive treasure hunt projects that involve inviting people out into the land and getting them to sometimes literally dig my art up out of the earth. And sometimes I make interactive walking artists, books, things like that. And so my process I would say is research generated and also very studio intensive. I'm kind of a slow labor as maker and I love having just a big empty studio day with like a list of to do items on the wall that I can march through and break down and and kind of go to work. I'm in a studio space that is one of the maybe the last remaining affordable studio buildings in Portland. They're building a luxury hotel across the street from us now. So our days may be limited. There's, I think, seven of us on this floor. And there's another floor of artists above us and really high caliber of artists involved here. It's sort of like I don't know, a community selected space like everybody on the floor chooses the new occupants. So there's no riffraff or ravers or people pretending to be artists. We're all pretty hard workers. I tended to kind of work a nine to five schedule. Get here in the morning and take a long coffee break and a yoga break and get back to work and work till dinner. I've had a studio in southeast Portland for the last 10 years. And before I found this space through a friend, I couldn't find a place to work that I could afford. And I came this close to leaving town. And so that's one of the major issues facing artists in Portland right now is just having affordable workspace. It's one of these strange cycles that I saw when I when I went to school in San Francisco as well where you know, the creative folks make a city really appealing to live in And then, you know, the city gets more expensive as more people move to it. And then the creative folks get priced out. And then it becomes sort of a shell of its former self. And, you know, the artists aren't can't afford to live in the city anymore. So that's, that's kind of where we're headed. I'm afraid I decided what my next project is going to be through a combination of just getting curious to answer what I identify as like the central questions of any project. So an example would be I had a body of work called New World Atlas of weeds and rags. And it started with the central question of what are we doing in a climate changing world that we're not noticing or

appreciating and through kind of following that research thread, and responding through imagery and research about the history of botanical illustration and growing my own garden. In the weeds that came with it had to kind of unpack that through my own artistic, artistic research angle. I think there's also an element of how do I want to spend my time? What do I want to do. And increasingly, as I make these hybrid projects that involve walking and writing and image making, I try to integrate the different things that I like to do, because I'm currently a really seasonal studio artist, and I'll go you know, leading trips with signal fire and scouting them and on my own camping trips for maybe three months a year, and then be back in the studio full time as a total troll the rest of the year, and I'd like to mix it up a little more and devise some way of working where I get to kind of integrate both of those practices. Yeah, so I do make a lot of really large scale work because it's really fun to have big area to play with as a painter. And also, if you see the work, you'll notice that I have an inclination towards maximalism. And so when I try to work small, I just feel things up so much that they become pretty uncomfortable to look at. And I feel that like when I spread out a little bit, there's maybe just the tiniest amount of breathing room to allow the viewer to navigate the digital space and the stories that implies I think that one of the best things about being an artist and especially as a painter is to go in search of surprises. And I think that the allegory at the core of the premise for this exhibition is about exploration and discovery and mapping perhaps, and that for me, there's like a really clear correlation between being out in the The world making those discoveries about what's around the next corner of the canyon to being in the studio and working as a painter and constantly seeking those surprises, some of which are fortunate, and some of which are, you know, my new little disasters that you have to fix. But I really do think of the art making process as like a series of errors and corrections that somehow winds up resolving itself into something palatable. Yeah, the map is not the territory, it really resonates with me, because I'm obsessed by maps. And I spend a lot of my life reading maps and teaching other people how to read them and using them to find my way through places I've never been before. So that's exciting. And also, as I understand it, that phrase refers to the distance between a model of reality and reality itself and so as a representational painter. I'm well as a representational painter. And as a wilderness guide, I'm involved in both far ends of that spectrum. And I love thinking about the distance between representing the natural world and just living in it, you know, sleeping in a place that's cold and damp and earthy and smells wonderful. And, you know, you're vulnerable to the weather. And yeah, like, I think in my work, I am increasingly thinking about trying to collapse the distance between those those ends of the spectrum. This is a really big deal for me to be part of this exhibition. It's the first time my works been recognized in the kind of biennial format although this is sort of a non traditional biennial iteration, but it's a big honor to be showing with these artists and and I'm excited to have more of a general audience for my work. I'm really excited that the curator has chosen or what I consider to be an eco regional model of the Pacific Northwest, because past biennials were like

Oregon, Washington, Montana and Idaho. And I really think of the Northwest more as a cascading model. And so these artists are Alaska, British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. And in my own work, there's a, there's a bio regional premise that supposes that nation states no longer exist. And so I really liked the idea that this spans nations and states and really looks at a ecologically determined region for for the exhibition. Yeah, I think that our geography and and environment really influences our our conception of region at least for myself at signifier we work in five different regions, primarily one is here in the Cascades one is the greater Let's ask you which folks are familiar with from Southern Oregon and Northern California, the mountains along that border. Also, the Sonoran desert and sky islands ranges within their the Four Corners region and the Pacific Northwest sub Rockies, or rocky sub region. Sub ranges, I think we would call it which I think would be sort of like the second part of the exhibition, the bitter roots and Eastern Oregon and places like that. And so for me, like at the core of my painting project is a bio regional reimagining of the map. And I like to imagine that in this world that I'm portraying that the United States as we know it has completely been erased and that new communities are reorganizing themselves around the shape of natural systems, and so governing by watershed and governing by eco region, and you know, in some instances were already kind of managing resources that way. But we have a long ways to go. For me, I'm motivated by the idea that the viewer might make discoveries within the scenes that I'm portraying, and share my sense of curiosity. And increasingly, my paintings are these kind of elaborate fictions or like these open ended fictions implied by the arrangement of objects and landscape within this kind of jumbled up picture plane. And so I like the idea that people would get in there and make up their own stories and even possibly, like, use that as an excuse to get curious about some aspect of the natural world that they weren't familiar with before. And so for example, the painting that I'm working on now has a choice, a cactus at the center of it growing up through a rug. And when I wanted to make a illustration of a choice of cactus, I thought about all the choices I had known and then pricked by in my travels, but then I kind of fell down this research rabbit hole of which choice subspecies to select. And so it's important to me to have really like specific natural information underlying the the subject matter that I choose, and that that has some meaning in the piece. And I don't want to explain it away and to make the work really didactic. But I do want that specificity to kind of give it a sense of urgency that will peak people's curiosity ideally, you know, I mean, some people are not going to like it at all, or find it to specific and off putting and that's okay, it's not for everyone, but that that specificity is there on The ingredients list and so I hope that some element of it, you know, makes its way into the final taste.



Grace Kook-Anderson 23:09

A major theme throughout the map is not the territory is decolonization and centering

indigenous values, we decided to ask all of the artists how those values influenced their work, regardless of their heritage.

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Ryan Pierce 23:25

Foremost I just want to be really cautious and state that I'm a white person, you know, living within the construct of settler colonial structure in the West. And in my work as an artist. I'm not really in my visual work. I'm not really addressing those ideas very much in my work with signal fire. We are increasingly working with native leadership within our own organization. And with native communities that live in or near the places that we're doing our outdoor programming and trying to share the stories of those communities, their histories and rights to the land with our participants and signal fire. And that's an ongoing process that's not always very graceful. The organization was started by two white people, and we, I think, are doing a better job of being listeners now, but much of the credit for the evolution of our organization has to do with the folks that we've brought into to help lead us and and help us grow in terms of decolonization. I would again, be really careful about what I actually claimed to do in my visual work. I don't think that a white guy making paintings that hanging a gallery or museum is actively involved in decolonization if there is an element that of the colonizing ethic that informs my work. It's just that I'm illustrating a future or a possible future where the natural world has usurped present power structures and initiated a realignment with the earth. And in terms of my work with signal fire, I mean, we are adamant that public lands or native lands, and we expose all of our participants to that idea. I do think that the early stages of decolonization probably involved probably involve just learning from the land and learning the history of the land and the people that live closest to the land. And so in that sense, I think that signifier contributes to an ethic of decolonisation at the earliest stages, but we're not actually taking land and return to its rightful inhabitants, I've been thinking about it in terms of of this exhibition because I'm, I feel like the theme of the exhibition really intersects a lot with my work. And yet, I also want to be really careful about what I'm planning to do with my work. And anytime that a curator or institutions situated in artists work, I think there's a potential of being misinterpreted that the artist situate their own work that way and really, you know, it's just one lens to look at our work through.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 26:40

Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast. On the next episode, you'll hear the full interview of a net Bellamy, an artist living and halibut Cove, Alaska, whose work can also be seen in the map is not the territory at the Portland Art Museum through May 5, 2019. Be sure to subscribe. So you know when that episode is released we appreciate that you've chosen to listen to this podcast and encourage you the listener to

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