

Q&A with Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs, Eva Respini

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By Lucie Mink

The Vancouver Art Gallery recently welcomed Eva Respini as its new Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs. Respini most recently held the title of Barbara Lee Chief Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (ICA/Boston) and has served as Curator at the Museum of Modern Art for more than a decade.

With her new role now underway, we asked Eva a few questions to learn more about her curatorial practice, inspirations and areas of interest.

Read through to get to know Eva and receive a glimpse into her curatorial vision for the Gallery.

1. What are you most looking forward to in your first few months as Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs at the Vancouver Art Gallery?

I look forward to spending time getting to know the Gallery staff, artists, writers, historians, collectors, and leaders of cultural Vancouver. I am new to Vancouver and look forward to learning what makes this town tick.

2. In what ways do you see your background as a global citizen influencing the curatorial operations of the Gallery?

I had a peripatetic upbringing. I have three citizenships: Italian, Norwegian and I just became a naturalized US citizen this summer. By age 18, I had lived in five different countries, not always speaking the language and in some cases, feeling culturally adrift. As an immigrant in these different contexts, I became adept at decoding culture through visual cues and making myself at home wherever I was. Without sounding too cheesy, my experiences also taught me that there are many commonalities that unite us. I do think art can provide points of connection, challenge us, propose new ways of thinking and maybe even help put us in other people's shoes. I hope to bring an ethos of open inquiry and inclusivity to the Gallery, both in terms of programs and operations.

3. Where do you draw your creative inspiration from and in what ways do you incorporate that inspiration into your curatorial work?

When I first began as a curator, I worked primarily with photography, which is arguably the lingua franca of our time. Everyone speaks it; everybody has a camera in their pocket. This gave me a unique perspective on art, in that it is not necessarily something disconnected from our daily lives.



Photo: Ian Lefebvre, Vancouver Art Gallery

One of the first exhibitions that I curated was about contemporary fashion photography. In fact, it was the first exhibition of fashion photography to be held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which tells you something about the historic hierarchies of the art categories that I find to be confining, especially in today's society. In many ways, that exhibition encapsulates my ongoing belief that creative expression can be found everywhere and in all forms. Since then, I have continued to think about the arts expansively, from a show I organized around internet culture to my most recent collaboration with Simone Leigh at the US Pavilion in the Venice Biennale.

4. You've lived in some of the most culturally dense and diverse cities in the world, what in particular speaks to you about Vancouver?

I love that Vancouver embraces culture and nature with equal zeal, and that high rises live side-by-side with some of the world's more beautiful parks. I love that on any given day, I hear multiple languages just walking down the street. And the food!

5. Is there anything you can share about future exhibitions you're excited to host at the Vancouver Art Gallery?

I think you will continue to see the work I have done throughout my career, which is to champion some of the most interesting and challenging art of our time and to also bring to light narratives that have been marginalized or under-recognized. I am hoping to bridge some of the projects I initiated in my previous institution (ICA/Boston), by bringing them to Vancouver. I hope to feature worldviews, narratives, and lived experiences that might be rooted in other geographies, cultures or lineages, and in a city as diverse as Vancouver, I think these narratives will resonate.

6. How do you see your work relating to the Gallery's four pathways: celebrating Indigenous culture; supporting art and artists; fostering community and learning; and stewarding environmental change?

We are living through times of historic change, unrest and possibility. In this post-pandemic era, we understand more than ever the importance of connection and culture for society's well-being. The artistic vision for the Gallery will benefit our era. It will tell the story of this place—a story intertwined with local, national and global narratives—and ask urgent questions of our times. The vision will honour the past while forging ahead to shape today's cultural dialogue. While not yet built, for me, the Gallery's new home designed by Herzog & de Meuron already broadcasts the tenants of the program and what a twenty-first-century museum should be—bold, porous and accessible. The building's signature woven facade underscores collaboration, fusing traditions of the Coast Salish weaving and Swiss architectural innovation. This synthesis is a powerful emblem of the program—one that is attentive to the local context and historical traditions while also bringing in global perspectives. This is already part of the Gallery's DNA, and I look forward to amplifying this, now, and in the new building.

7. You are entering this role at an equally exciting and pivotal time in the Gallery's history. A new building is on the horizon and yet there is so much room for change and expansion in the interim. How do you see the work you'll do this year laying the foundation for the long-term vision of the Gallery?

Museums are shaped by their histories and local context. Museums are also not monoliths—they are made of many individuals whose whole interests and tastes shape and define an institution. As curators, I think it is necessary to continually examine how we inhabit (as opposed to occupy) our spaces and acknowledge that we are mere custodians in a long line of caretakers. As many people know, the word curator originates from Latin "to care." So, I will approach this next year of expansion, change, and possibility with this mindset.

8. What do you think is a uniquely "Respinian" aspect of your work?

Looking at my projects as a whole, I would say they are guided by a belief that the knowledge artists produce is meaningful. I also seem to be attracted to the big, thorny, questions of the day, be it immigration in the time of the Trump presidency, how internet culture changed art and the world or how individual artists can help us contend with our changing climate. As I curator, I follow artists and hope that I can give their ideas a public platform. I see my role as a translator of sorts, between artists and audiences. For me, being a curator is making an argument in space—there is a dramaturgy to how stories unfold in the galleries. I enjoy this aspect of exhibition-making very much, which is different than the work an art historian might do in a book or paper. I believe in the power of art in person. If the pandemic confirmed anything, it is that looking at images online will never hold a candle to what happens when you are in front of an artwork in the flesh.

9. What or who comes to mind when you think of British Columbian art and what themes do you most connect with in the Gallery's permanent collection?

The permanent collection belongs to everyone and, while it's rooted in history, it also looks to the future. The Gallery's collection's strengths are the museum's DNA and provide the backbone to the artistic program and its guiding values. There are many highlights for me, among the ones that speak most to me is the important repository of Emily Carr, a woman overlooked in her time; the stellar collection of contemporary photography, arguably the most ubiquitous medium of our era; the unparalleled collection of modern and contemporary art from British Columbia, the only place this breadth could be found; the collection of international Pop Art and Conceptual Art, the contemporary Asian art collection; and the historic and contemporary Indigenous art from the region. These strengths paint a picture of an institution with continued relevance, attuned to history and its region, and with a track record of championing and capturing new artistic dialogues as they developed. I can't wait to delve deep to learn this collection intimately.

10. You've made so many notable contributions to your field through various channels, where else can we expect to see work proliferate following your relocation?

I will continue to see through the projects I initiated at my previous institution, the ICA/Boston. Two exhibitions I curated, dedicated to the work of Simone Leigh and Firelei Báez, are travelling throughout North America through 2025, to Washington DC and Los Angeles, among other cities. Additionally, I am curating the Platform section of the Armory show in New York this September. This presentation of large-scale sculpture and installations includes some of the most interesting international artists working today, including Teresita Fernandez, Hank Willis Thomas, Yinka Shonibare, and Xu Chen.