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At the Nasher, guard perfects the art of friendliness

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By Mark Lamster, Architecture Critic, 13 Nov. 2015 04:16 PM Updated: 15 Nov. 2015 10:52 AM



1/3

Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

Nasher Sculpture Center guard Patricia Ann Jackson, with artist Alex Israel's work, is at the forefront of a trend in which museum guards are deployed to help make visitors feel comfortable looking at works that can be inscrutable in settings that can be intimidating.

Everyone's a critic. The phrase is not typically meant as a compliment, but for those of us who do the job professionally, it's not only a badge of honor, but a goal. Building an engaged public is one of our chief responsibilities, and we need all the help we can get.

At the Nasher Sculpture Center, that help comes from an unlikely source, Patricia Ann Jackson, a native Dallasite who has worked as a guard at the museum for the last three years, mostly in the lower-level gallery, where she has gained a devoted following for her considerable charm and perspicacious, if idiosyncratic, commentary.

"If you come into a room and I'm the guard, I should be able to tell you something about the pieces that are in the room, and not just be a piece in the room," says Jackson, 46.

On a recent afternoon, Jackson walked a small group of students visiting from Wichita Falls through an exhibition of work by the California artist Alex Israel, whom she had met during the show's installation. "If you look really close, it looks like an Oscar," she said in front of Israel's

sculpture *Casting* (2015), which, indeed, has an impression of an Academy Award set within turquoise acrylic. “He knows a lot of stars, but he’s really down to earth.”

Jackson’s information is reliably entertaining, if not infallible. Introducing an Israel piece featuring reproductions of noted sculptures from Hollywood films, Jackson misattributed the Maltese Falcon to *Casablanca*, a rare slip that didn’t seem to faze the group. “She seemed to really like the pieces and being around them,” said Tiffany Thoes. “She made it more playful.”

It is a common refrain among patrons.

“She was so warm and just immediately struck up a conversation,” says Wendi Konradi, a Nasher Center member who visited with her niece, Anna Konradi, during the museum’s exhibition on architect Thomas Heatherwick. “It was lovely to see her engage a then 16-year-old teenager and have a different viewpoint. ... She told us how she was able to meet Heatherwick. Obviously she’s not afraid to talk to anyone. It was really great for my niece to see that. You never know who you’re going to interact with.”

“She’s one of the most engaging security guards we’ve ever had here,” says Jacqueline Washington, who manages the museum’s visitor services. “As soon as she sees someone walking down the stairs she’ll greet them and ask them if they’ve been here, and walk them around the gallery.”



2/3 Photos by Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

Nasher Sculpture Center guard Patricia Ann Jackson discusses artist Alex Israel’s work with Lewisville ISD DeLay Middle School students. “Every time we have an artist here, I get familiarized with who they are and what they’re about, so I know what to talk about,” she says.

general admission to its galleries. “When we went free to the public, we changed our philosophy from being a security model to a visitor-focused model,” says Barbee Barber, the museum’s director of staff and visitor experience.

Barber’s very title, with the telling inclusion of the phrase “visitor experience,” suggests just how ingrained this shift has become. It is a change modeled not just in the guards’ behavior at the DMA, but in their uniforms, which were changed from traditional blue blazers with red ties to a more casual look of khaki pants and polo shirts. “It’s much less intimidating,” says Barber.

At the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, things are not quite so informal, but there is an emphasis on hospitality. “Our guards are instructed to be extremely friendly, but maybe not very gregarious,” says George Shackelford, the Kimbell’s chief curator. “Our guards are never scolders.”

It is an interaction the Nasher encourages. Indeed, it is one of several museums in Dallas, a city in which cultural institutions have been perceived as the province of an elite, at the forefront of a trend in which guards are deployed almost as ambassadors. The goal: Make visitors feel comfortable looking at work that can be inscrutable and provocative in settings that can be intimidating.

That effort is particularly visible at the Dallas Museum of Art, which initiated a change in the way its guards interact with the public in 2013, when it ceased charging

Tyler Green, a critic whose popular Modern Art Notes podcast is a staple of museum programming around the country, has noted this evolution in responsibilities. “With contemporary art, a certain level of engagement is often allowed or encouraged,” he says. “I can imagine that as more and more square footage goes to contemporary, that museums would naturally prioritize guards interacting with visitors so that visitors get maximum experience with unfamiliar art.”

Among the institutions more aggressively pushing staff to interact with visitors are the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C., the Denver Art Museum and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark.

Guards at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art have begun outreach on their own, forming their own journal, the gamely titled *Swipe Magazine*. There is, indeed, a long tradition of artists working as guards, a job that offers both a paycheck and prolonged exposure to influential work. The painters Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman worked as guards at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Fred Wilson translated his experience as a museum guard into the subject of *Guarded View* (1991), a sculpture featuring the headless bodies of guards from four New York museums, among them the Whitney Museum of American Art, which acquired it.

“[There’s] something funny about being a guard in a museum. You’re on display but you’re also invisible,” said Wilson.

Not all guards are artistically inclined, however, or even make for capable docents. “You can walk into a museum and have guards that are just there and may politely tell someone don’t touch. But Patricia makes people feel very welcome, and hearing her very personal perspective emboldens people to have their own perspective on works of art,” says Jed Morse, the Nasher’s chief curator. “The museological perspective is presented in the various kinds of didactic materials we provide. But that’s not the only kind of experience one can have. Patricia makes people feel comfortable looking at the art through their own lens.”



3/3 Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer
Nasher Sculpture Center guard Patricia Ann Jackson discusses artist Alex Israel’s work with Lewisville ISD DeLay Middle School students.

Jackson’s perspective, if unique, is not uninformed. “Every time we have an artist here, I get familiarized with who they are and what they’re about, so I know what to talk about,” says Jackson. “I do research at home on the Internet and stay up late at night trying to figure out what’s coming up next.”

That kind of initiative was actually born not of the museum’s administration, but driven by the guards themselves. “We don’t expect the guards to impart content, but we want them to know a bit about the exhibition, because they live here and see the works more than anybody else,” says Morse.

“It came from us,” says Helen Fisher, an Army veteran who has worked security at the Nasher for seven years, and who took Jackson under her wing when she came to the museum. “As we did it more and more, we got advice from the education department and the curators and also our immediate supervisors in the security department.”

Part of the motivation came from working in the lower-level gallery, a tomblike space without much natural light. “It’s the last frontier of the museum,” says Fisher. “People come down there looking for the restroom, and you have to encourage them to come into the gallery.”

Hospitality, nevertheless, remains secondary to the principal function of protecting the contents of the museum from patrons, and sometimes patrons of the museum from artworks that can themselves pose dangers. But even in these cases, staff is instructed to follow the golden rule and remain polite at all times. “You talk to people how you want to be talked to. You do not yell at anyone,” says Jackson.

Although sometimes the idea is tempting, as when a woman recently tested the weight of a Garth Evans sculpture by partially pulling it off the wall. “I almost had a fit,” says Jackson. “I was like, you can’t do that with other people’s things! You’re going to break it!”

The security value offered by the museum guard, as that incident suggests, is largely prophylactic. In the case of a serious security threat, there isn’t much the guard can do but sound an alarm and wait for more aggressive security measures. At the Nasher, as at many smaller museums, those responsibilities are subcontracted out, in this case to the security conglomerate G4S.

“The only thing I have is a radio,” says Jackson, who is actually a G4S employee. “But we do have to be watchful. I’m always looking, even when people don’t think I’m looking. You’ve got to have eyes in the back of your head.”

That often means keeping track of children, a skill at which Jackson, who was once a preschool teacher, is quite adept. Particularly troublesome is a tall sculpture of green fiberglass, Isaac Witkin’s *Volution* of 1964, that looks like toothpaste squeezed from a tube. “I just call it the big worm,” says Jackson. “Little kids come down here and want to step on it. I’m like, no, you cannot kill it!”

Indeed, Jackson has developed a fan among the regular visitors of the junior set, a young girl who likes to bring her own art to show off to “Ms. Patty.”

Perhaps, some day, she will land her work in the Nasher on a permanent basis. Or maybe she’ll become a critic. “Everyone has a love for art,” says Jackson. “They just may not know it.”
Mark Lamster is a professor at the University of Texas at Arlington School of Architecture.

Plan your life

The Nasher Sculpture Center is at 2001 Flora St., Dallas.

Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays.

\$10; discounts apply. 214-242-5100. nashersculpturecenter.org.