

So You Want To Be a Curator?

interview by BENJAMIN VEGA

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This summer, Intern Benjamin Vega interviewed Nasher Assistant Curator Leigh Arnold about the nature and purpose of curatorial work in a museum. Below is an abridged version of their conversation.

Some of Leigh's duties as a curator include conducting research on objects in the permanent collection, writing for *The Nasher* magazine and assisting with art installations, both laying out and de-installing (removing) works. Leigh is a primary liaison for artists and works closely with the registration and conservation departments to monitor the condition of artworks.

BENJAMIN VEGA: Did you always want to be a curator?

LEIGH ARNOLD: Yes, even when I didn't know what it might entail.

BV: What do you recommend as a major or a minor if you want to pursue this career?

LA: Majoring in art history would help with the research aspect of the job. If you want to work in academia, a foreign language will help you study foreign art and artists. If you are interested in working in a for-profit organization, like an art gallery, I recommend minoring in business administration, so you'll have a better understanding of the art market.

BV: What kinds of people do you work with as a curator?

LA: Artists, registrars, conservators, art handlers, development (fundraising) staff, curators and registrars from other museums, and Nasher patrons and visitors.

BV: Are there any protocols when installing a new exhibition?

LA: We typically work with the artists on their installations, though it depends on the personality of the artist. Some artists rely on the museum's curatorial staff to install the work, while others prefer a more hands-on approach. We aim for a harmonious result.

BV: What kinds of common obstacles do you face in your job?

LA: Obstacles vary with every artist, object, or installation. For example, an upcoming exhibition will feature multiple incredibly heavy sculptures. We needed to take into account their weights as well as the weight of the machinery needed to move them to ensure the building was structurally capable of supporting the installation. Planning for that required a lot of practical problem-solving in consultation with structural engineers.

BV: How do you choose what to bring out from your permanent collection?

LA: We tend to relate it to what's on view in the temporary exhibition gallery. If the temporary exhibition is work by a living artist and that artist is interested and willing, we like to invite him/her to make a selection of works from the permanent collection, which always results in exciting pairings and juxtapositions. Kathryn Andrews has selected many of the works that will be on view in the permanent-collection gallery during the run of her exhibition this fall.

BV: Do you believe museums exist to interpret the past or to change the future?

LA: Both. With our contemporary exhibitions we can shape our visitors' understanding of the future of art and with our permanent collection we demonstrate the continuing relevance of the past.