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Neuberger Museum at Purchase College, Interview: Tracy Fitzpatrick, Curator

Philip Eliasoph
Fairfield University, pielasoph@fairfield.edu

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May/June_CT-NY Edition



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*Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase College, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, NY
Telephone: 914.251.6100, Email: www.neuberger.org*

est achievement: The creation of a state university system with 72 campuses serving the educational aspirations of a quarter of a million students annually. As one of the nation's modern Medici, 'Rocky' will forever be honored for funding one of the world's leading public education systems. In some minuscule way, I too am deeply indebted to this powerful arts patron and educational champion, as an appreciative alumnus.

Nestled in the wooded 500 acres of the historic Strathglass Farm estate, once owned by Revolutionary War patriot Thomas as Thomas, Purchase College is a 'flash-frozen' monument of mega-scaled late modernist architecture. Long before hitting the tarmac at Westchester Airport, I had grown accustomed to flying over the ensemble of buildings since my last campus visit over 20 years ago. But a recent 'legs on the ground' viewing of the Purchase complex sparked a re-thinking of the strengths and weaknesses of the sprawling environs.

Transforming open fields into a master plan, Edward Larrabee Barnes and a team of architects were thrown into service as Rockefeller used his checkbook. New York State's tax subsidies, and his mighty artistic whip as a pharomic overseer building his great educational temple city at Purchase. With contributions from a who's who of architectural titans including John Burgee, Paul Rudolph, Charles Gwathmey and Robert Venturi, the campus grew into a massive intersection of architectural planning and rigidly applied late modern aesthetics. I think of it as the final gasp of the Bauhaus, on steroids—an experiment, though brilliantly conceived, but with consequences not entirely thought through.

by Philip Eliasoph

Civic Space + Visual Library + Academic Freedom = Neuberger Museum at Purchase College

interview:

TRACY FITZPATRICK, CURATOR, NEUBERGER MUSEUM OF ART, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY, PURCHASE COLLEGE

Juggling "practice and theory" in her profession, Tracy Fitzpatrick has achieved a kind of cosmic nirvana. Feeling "really lucky" with her career trajectory, she calibrates energy, skill-set and intellect into her own Cuisinart blend of creativity. Between "hands-on" curating and college classroom teaching, Fitzpatrick is hitting a full-gallop stride.

It's a really rewarding—but exhausting—balancing act, and the students and visitors to the Neuberger Museum have ample evidence of her accomplishments. There's little doubt in my mind that she is just the kind of teaching arts ambassador that the museum's namesake, Bridgeport native and Wall Street financier Roy R. Neuberger, would have hired to promote his personal vision.

The net result is Fitzpatrick's pleasure in "spending time with my students, [which] makes me a better curator, and... spend-

ing time with art objects, [which] makes me a better teacher." Arriving at this moment in her career, she took an uncharacteristic pause in her daily routine for an updated spin around the galleries. With a growing resume listing numerous coveted fellowships from national foundations, faculty grants, and a diversified range of publications and catalogs on topics ranging from 'Women Artists and the WPA Era' to 'Underground Art: Images of the New York City Subway', she offers a richness of knowledge without becoming bogged-down or hyper-focused in academic myopia.

It's been too long since this art critic had last visited the Neuberger Museum. A robust calendar of innovative exhibits and events were routinely on my 'must-do' list for reviews many years ago on my peripatetic itinerary around the regional arts scene. Founded in 1967 by Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Purchase College is yet another jewel in the crown of his great-

With the romantic instincts of a utopian socialist vision—like the un-built fantasies of Antonio Sant'Elia's "Città Nuova" of 1914—the Purchase campus can now both be appreciated and critiqued as a vestigial specimen of what works well and what might have been lost in translation. The huge hulking buildings, many windowless with massively blank surfaces, form a Mondrian grid of monolithic anonymity.

One might imagine Lincoln Center torn from an urban location and replaced with stately oak and pine trees serving as sentinels to a De Chirico-esque landscape. People are reduced to mere model figurines moving across these broad planes, campus pathways, and endless perspectival vistas. The master-builders' egos enjoyed the purity of their blueprint designs at a price. It's just so hard to imagine college kids or campus visitors arriving for a wonderful evening of dance, jazz, or classical music warming up to their megalomaniacal spaces. Homo-sapien two-legged creatures wandering across a series of X-Y-Z intersecting surfaces, voids and volumes are reduced to accessories—not primary inhabitants.

More chilling in its alienating mood and less sensorial by embracing human proportions, the space for public education, arts and enlightenment arouses questions about the course of such orthodox planning. These types of uber-modernist designs remind me of Ada Louise Huxtable's comment about modern architects like Gropius, Wright and Mies who designed uncomfortable residences. They "never insisted that their occupants re-shape themselves to conform to an abstract architectural ideal."





Edward Hopper, Barber Shop, 1951. Oil on canvas, 60 x 78 inches.
Collection: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, University of New York.
Gift of Roy R. Neuberger; Photo: Jim Frank

Fortunately, Philip Johnson's generous 79,000 square-foot design for the Neuberger Museum gives ample latitude for Fitzpatrick to design and install exhibitions with innumerable possibilities. Opened in 1974, Mr. Neuberger has been quoted as saying that the "true spirit of his personal collection could be found on the second floor." Up there you will experience a steady stream of American masters of the 20th century. He bought a bundle of works by Milton Avery, sensing his unrecognized talent.

Recently seen on the walls at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Edward Hopper's "Barbershop" is a crème-de-la-crème signature work of America's leading curmudgeon. "We've been in that place," we muse—not fully comprehending its disquieting silences. Ironic Abstract Expressionist works by Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning are like pulsating Buddhist incantations, their mantras beckoning us into moments of reverie, dread and ecstasy. If I was ever left alone upstairs, it would be reminiscent of Mark Rothko's chapel at St. Thomas University in Houston. "OHMMMM..."

A street-smart stockbroker who founded one of Wall Street's most respected investment firms, Neuberger died at age 107 in December, 2010 at his home in the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan. He was unquestionably one of the most celebrated art collectors of his generation. "I like adventuresome work that I didn't understand," he noted. "For art to be good it has to be over your head."

In the most heartfelt manner, let me kneel in lasting admiration: "Thanks so very much Mr. Neuberger—you've given generations so much to think about, reflect on, and just enjoy!"

* * * *

VENÜ: Tracy – knowing how much multi-tasking you do in a position wearing at least two hats, let's jump right in. Can you offer us an insight into your own sense of the interactive roles you play simultaneously as art curator and college professor? What's the yin-yang of curating and teaching effectively?

Tracy: At Purchase, I get to do the two things I love: teach practice and theory that's the great thing about my job and, really, really, what exemplifies Purchase. This is a place designed specifically for that purpose. It's where students can, amazingly, learn about the history of modern art in one building and then go next door to the Neuberger Museum and spend time with a Jackson Pollock or a Mark Rothko.

Are there any specific duties, obligations, or perhaps even burdens – you feel that a university art museum requires in contrast to larger national flagship institutions [MoMA, Guggenheim] or smaller privately organized museums [Frick, Corcoran, etc.]? What sets you apart?

That's a really important question . . . You know, for most college museums, the campus is more than just home or the place where the building sits. For us, Purchase College not



Jack Levine, The Banquet, 1941. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 30 inches.
Collection: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, University of New York.
Gift of Roy R. Neuberger

only enables, but also necessitates that the Neuberger take advantage of academic freedom in the way we approach our program. And that means taking some risks in what we do.

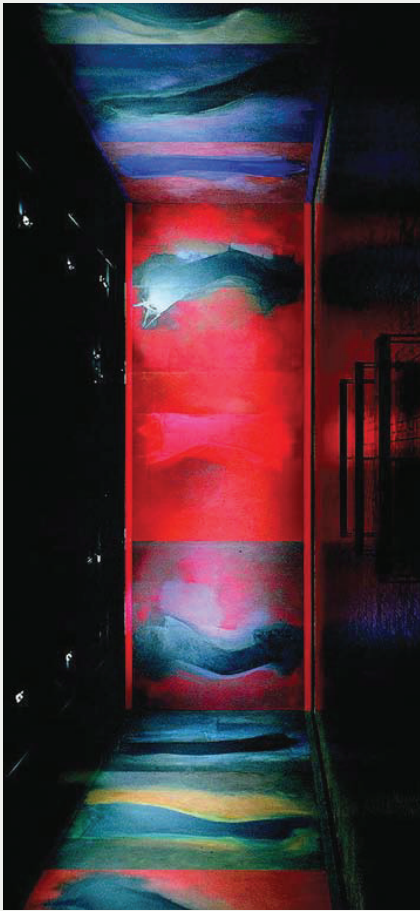
It's complicated, though. The Neuberger, like a handful of our peers in the US, is unique in that we're both a college museum and a civic institution, operated, in part, by the State of New York. That makes us, to use Robert Storr's words, a kind of public library of visual culture. From that starting point, it's more about how a museum negotiates its role as a civic space that works within the protections of academic freedom. I think the answer, at least for me, isn't only about the material you offer, but also about the questions you ask—of the material and of your viewer. If approached thoughtfully and rigorously, the museum can since the classroom prompts similar kinds of questions.

Recognizing that quite admirably, the Neuberger has never shied away from exhibitions which are 'cutting edge,' 'out there,' or even 'controversial' – how does the support of the taxpayers of the State of New York impact the curatorial or decision-making process? Is absolute 'freedom of expression' versus consideration of context ever compromised?

For an art museum to be located on a college campus, it seems to me to be the best of all possible worlds. It allows us to pose important questions and educate the broadest possible audience in and through the visual arts.

You have such a wide range of interests – from the development of early abstraction, feminist art, and the visual culture of the New York City subway system. Tell us a bit about your background with details of your educational and professional experiences, and most valuable lessons you have learned along the journey.

I was really lucky because I found art history early, in my first semester of college. The big thing was, OK, now that I've found it, what do I do with it. I did lots of internships at different kinds of art spaces. And, then, while interning at a major museum in Boston, I was leaving the building one night, after hours, by way of the neo-classical sculpture galleries. The lights were out and there were no guards around. I stopped in front of this sculpture of a child sleeping on a cushion, and I remember thinking to myself: How can marble look so soft but be so hard? It was right then that I decided to work directly with art objects. Now, years later, I find I'm more experienced in my field but, essentially, I'm in exactly the same place—still fascinated by art objects, their tactility, their beauty, and their meanings both past and present. I found teaching much later, really quite unexpectedly, while finishing my Ph.D. I was giving my first college course and kind of surprised myself at how much I loved being in the classroom. In many ways, a classroom is more fluid than a museum. It's a space where ideas can be exchanged more quickly and where I'm always learning from my students. The most important lesson I've learned professionally is that spending time with my students makes me a better curator and that spending time with art objects makes me a better teacher.



Cleve Gray, *Thamesy (detail)*, 1972-73. Acrylic on canvas, 28 panels, 6 panels, 240 x 110 inches each, 72 panels, 240 x 103 inches each. Collection: Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. Gift of the artist with support from the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art.

When Mr. Neuberger was honored at the White House in 2007, at a spry 104 years of age, the citation for the National Arts Medal noted both his “keen eye and generous spirit.” In your capacity as the “hands on” steward of this remarkable collection—can you point to key examples of how prescient he was in the almost mystical realm known as the “art of collecting?”

I really think that Roy’s prescience certainly went to his collecting; he bought artists in the formative stages of their careers—artists like Romare Bearden, Willem de Kooning, Edward Hopper, Lee Krasner, Hedde Sterne, Jacob Lawrence, and Jackson Pollock. But he was also a pioneer in other areas. From 1940s through 1960s, he loaned portions of his collection to small and rural museums in the US and to foreign embassies in “goodwill” exhibitions. For example, he loaned work to the American National Exhibition, which was held in Sokolniki Park, Moscow in 1959. That show was one of the first results of the cultural agreement signed between the US and the Soviet Union in 1958. He sent parts of his collection to other countries during that time as well—to Japan, England, Italy, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Israel. Often, these exhibitions gave diverse audiences with their first art works by artists like Pollock. I think he also helped begin another important trend—he bought art to hang in the offices of his firm, Neuberger Berman. That was a choice that helped forge the idea of the corporate art collection.

One of favorite pearls of wisdom was a precious quip from the legendary art dealer, Lord Joseph Duveen. As he inspired America’s greatest art patrons—Frick, Kress, Huntington, Mellon—to reach for their checkbooks, he would whisper: “Art is priceless—and when you pay for the infinite with the finite—you’re getting a bargain!” My question is: how do you react when visitors to the Neuberger are often more curious that your wonderful Pollock has a cur-



Richard Diebenkorn, *Girl on a Terrace*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 70 1/2 x 65 3/8 inches. Collection: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. Gift of Roy R. Neuberger.

in terms of acquiring artists early in their careers versus those purchases he made of already acknowledged American masters?

I don’t really think of it as intuition. I think of it as a commitment, a commitment to a guiding principle—to support living artists. For him, that meant buying work from an artist, often at a time in their lives when they needed it most. Take the Pollock just as one for example. Roy bought that work in 1949. He walked in the Betty Parsons Gallery to see Pollock’s show there that November. The show was a few months after that big *Life* magazine article on Pollock, you know, the one that asked if he was the greatest living painter in the United States. Pollock was getting attention, certainly, but he hadn’t gotten a lot of traction in sales yet. Parsons called Roy later that day and said something to the effect of, “I saw you earlier, looking closely at that one painting. You know, Jackson really needs money. Would you buy it?” And Roy said yes. He bought a lot of his work that way. Practically wet and often from artists at formative moments in their careers.

If you can’t tell me what it’s worth, can you at least tell me what he paid for it? \$800.

Finally, let’s play an old “what if?” that many art historians, curators, or even collectors with deep affection for specific collections often engage in as an intellectual and emotional game. Tracy, if “Heavens forbid!” the fire alarm was suddenly going off and you dash out of your office to see the Neuberger’s collection endangered by rising flames—which painting or object would grab and head for the front door knowing you could only rescue one?

A really tough question, but I’d grab the one I think meant the most the Roy—Marsden Hartley’s *Fisherman’s Last Supper* (1940-41), an extraordinary painting that is probably the best known work he purchased. He bought that painting in 1943 from the well known art dealer Paul Rosenberg. In 2003, at the age of 100, he wrote about that work in his autobiography, *The Passionate Collector*. He said that when he brought it home, he felt like he had finally had an American masterpiece. And he did. It’s been included in major exhibitions on Hartley and on American modernism. Fortunately, (considering the question!), for now, it’s still hanging in his apartment, probably missing him as much as he loved it. □

rent market value which could easily endow dozens of full professors for the university. How do you keep their eyes on Duveen’s sense of the “infinite?”

You’re right. People do want to know what the Pollock is worth. I don’t tell them and I can’t tell you. But I can say that when I’m asked the question, I explain how Roy thought about his art. He didn’t buy art as an investment. In fact, he never sold a painting. He just gave them away—to big and small museums. And he didn’t like to talk about art history either. He just bought what he liked, what he enjoyed looking at. He lived living with his art, talking about it. He would visit the museum and even into his 100s, he could remember where he bought a work and why he chose the one he chose. He was passionate about it. So, I try to convey that passion to the people who come visit with us.

Our readers are always fascinated to better understand the subtle relationships between the economics of the art market, the hierarchies of the museum world, and the dynamics of artists who achieve enormous critical success. In your mind, how do you evaluate Mr. Neuberger’s intuition



Philip Elsworth is Professor of Art History at Fairfield University. He moderates and directs the university’s popular Open Valiors Forum series, featuring leading artists, political figures, and artistic notables in a town public conversations in a town hall setting. He serves as a board member of the Connecticut Tourism for the State of Connecticut. In September, he new book on the life and art of the nearly forgotten painter Colleen Browning, NA 1918-2003 will be published in conjunction with an international retrospective of her works.