

table talk

AN INTERVIEW WITH INGRID SCHAFFNER, CURATOR OF THE CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART'S 57TH INTERNATIONAL

Ingrid Schaffner, born in Pittsburgh and previously chief curator of The Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, has returned to take on the Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum Of Art's – and Pittsburgh's – signature and most exciting exhibition of contemporary art. Dating back to 1896, the exhibition is the second oldest survey of international contemporary art in the world. After three years of research that has taken Schaffner and her team around the world, the interpretation will open this fall and explore two guiding pursuits: Defining what the word “international” means today and what she calls “museum joy.” With a project this large, we were lucky to squeeze into Schaffner's schedule to learn more about her curatorial practice (and what she makes for dinner).



Fred Blauth: I've attended your annual lecture at the museum, where you ask the question, “What is contemporary?” With more and more people claiming the title “curator” for themselves, I'd like to ask what does it mean to you to curate and what makes a contemporary curator, today?

Ingrid Schaffner: I am a contemporary curator, meaning I organize exhibitions, programs, and publications that connect people with contemporary art and ideas. It's important to say that the contemporary isn't necessarily what's new, next, or young. What is contemporary is relevant, urgent, seen with new eyes. You want to make a contemporary exhibition of a rare collection of colonial bread pans? Show us why we should care, why do they matter—*right now*. Plus, I write a lot. Writing is an essential form of communication for curators! As for the word, “curate” always makes me think of lowly clergy in Jane Austen novels.

FB: With an emphasis on bringing international art to Pittsburgh, in what ways are you keeping in mind our own artists and patrons in your process of curating *The International*?

IS: At a first studio visit with Thaddeus Mosley, he said that it was at the 1958 Carnegie International that he realized his own vocation as an artist. And there will be a number of other artists in the next Carnegie International for whom Pittsburgh has been home. I'm also excited about the initiative that Janera Solomon and I cooked up—a collaboration between Kelly Strayhorn Theater and the Carnegie Museum of Art—called *Keyword: International* that is supporting local research to creatively define what makes Pittsburgh an international city at this moment in time. The findings will be published in the catalog for the Carnegie International. The “international” is not something far, far away. We live in a global world and are part of the international every day.

FB: You've resurrected and remixed the CMOA's historic “Tam O'Shanter Drawing Classes for Children” by creating a series of public programs at the museum and in collaboration with other art institutions around the city. What's up next?

IS: I love the idea of “remix” because every Tam Session is a new spin, or take, on drawing as an activity that connects the eye, the mind, the hand, and in this case, participants in the Carnegie International with the local community. Our last Tam Session was hosted by The Frick with Art Labor, a collective from Vietnam, who introduced us to their work and guided a workshop on the tradition of painting on silk using Vietnamese coffee as ink. Next up is a session with Kenyan photographer Mimi Cheron Ng'ok. As we speak, I don't know exactly what Mimi has in store, but details will be posted on the International's website (2018. carnegieinternational.org), where there are photo albums of each of the past Tams.

FB: I thought it would be fun to share these two questions from other Pittsburghers who work in the arts as well. Graham Shearing, art critic turned Instagram #foodie, wants to know about the last meal you cooked yourself.

IS: I don't have a photo of the meal I cooked Monday night to introduce Kouoh Koyo to friends and colleagues. Very simple: a Mark Bittman recipe for salmon roasted in butter, served with Romanesco and rice, my cousin Nancy Wolosyn's recipe for cardamom cookies and fruit for dessert. Preparing and sharing a meal is the best communion I know for thanking and welcoming people whose gifts I admire at a table salubrious to good conversation all round.

FB: Jessica Beck, Milton Fine Curator at the Warhol Museum, would like to know what you're currently reading.

IS: Two books by friends: Anne Doran's tales of the maverick curator Walter Hopps, *About the Dream Colony*, and *The Gourmand's Way*, Justin Spring's account of six Americans in Paris and the birth of a new gastronomy.

FB: We realize you can only tell us so much, but who are some of the artists you're including in the International? What kinds of themes are you most excited to explore?

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IS: Instead of treating the artist list like a secret recipe, we started announcing participants last fall as part of generally opening up the process of the International. Two main pursuits are the “international” (what does that word mean today) and the “museum joy” of being with art and other people, especially in the Carnegie Museum, which is, after all, a museum of museums, built in part on the history of International.