

Rachel Moore

New Executive Director

Helen Day Art Center in Stowe

by Cynthia Close

Anyone who has worked with Rachel Moore was not surprised when it was announced on August 1 that she would be taking over from Nathan Suter as executive director of the Helen Day Art Center in Stowe.

Moore began her connection to the art center six years ago as an independent curator for *Exposed*, the signature public art event that places sculpture along Main Street, on the recreational path, and on the grounds of the Helen Day. This was an excellent opportunity for Moore to get to know the community, engaging artists and working with commercial interests along the way. Her success in bringing art to the people, while simultaneously drawing more nationally and internationally recognized artists to Vermont, was soon recognized, and she quickly moved into a permanent staff position as assistant director.

Arts Early Influence

Originally from Pennsylvania, Moore's earliest recollections of her budding career in the arts were the private art lessons she took in the fourth grade. Her mom was a graphic designer, and her father was a writer. They supported their daughter's artistic inclinations including a precollege stint in ceramics at the Rhode Island School of Design. While she loved experimenting with various mediums, she also knew she wanted to balance art making with a strong liberal arts education and opted to attend Alfred University where she graduated in 2001 with a bachelor of fine arts. The following year a GAP (Grant for Artists Projects) award took her to Seattle, Washington, where she discovered an interest in glass blowing and other methods exploring the expressive qualities of glass. While in Washington, Moore held an artist residency at Wilson High School in Tacoma and, in 2005, an emerging artist residency at the highly respected Pilchuck Glass School, founded in 1971 by the world-renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly. These residencies enabled her to share her work and educate others while receiving financial support.

Chicago and Community Activism

[The following paragraph about her work in Chicago needs to be better explained. I had difficulty understanding it. To try and understand, I did a little research and found this bit that Moore wrote herself about her work in Chicago: "I came to Garfield Park Conservatory while in graduate school with the push of an instructor, Drea Howenstein, from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her class, which she urged me to audit, located itself there to respond and make work based on what was needed. I found myself participating by agreeing to help Julia Bachrach and Jo Ann Nathan collect oral histories for their book, 'Inspired by Nature.'" This quote brings in other aspects not apparent in what you wrote. So did she go to the Conservatory with the grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Service? This isn't clear. Maybe a word or two about what the conservatory is, what she did there, and how this connected her to the community.] It was during her master of fine arts program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where

Moore's leadership skills became evident. In Chicago she integrated her sculpture, photography, video, and design work with collaborative community-based work, due in part to an Institute of Museum and Library Services Grant. The grant presented an opportunity for Moore to answer a rising question in her personal art practice: "Who sees this work and why does it matter?" Her investment working in the trenches on socially or environmentally responsible community art projects in Chicago's West Side, an area that had been plagued with unrest, led to an adjustment in her perspective that was "eye-opening, a pivotal life experience."

The West Side was also home to The Garfield Park Conservatory. Built in 1908, it occupies 4.5 acres within the larger 184 acre site of Garfield Park. It houses thousands of plant species, both under glass and outdoors. It was not only a tourist attraction, but was meant serve as a horticultural facility and cultural asset to surrounding community. It has survived urban decay, urban renewal, and various forces of nature like the catastrophic hailstorm of 2011 that shattered approximately half the glass panes in its greenhouses. Historically this area of Chicago was a gateway for immigrants as well as a home for low-income, poverty stricken families. It appeared to Moore that there was a disconnect between the Conservatory and the community it was in part intended to serve. In 2008, her Institute of Library and Museum Services Grant allowed her to explore this issue. To educate herself, she made a point of listening to the stories of the people who lived in the community, those who had been in the midst of rioting, looting, and burning, which had overshadowed the activism and positive influence that had also taken root in those same neighborhoods. She made it a point to showcase bottom-up storytelling, rather than the usual top-down elitist methodology we associate with "high art." Moore learned the value of integrating the immigrant voices that had been fragmented in pockets throughout the West Side. She is a cofounder of *Spoke* (2008–2011), "a small but incredibly vibrant collective of artists" who maintained an exhibition and event space in Chicago. "Artists that are involved with *Spoke* are often active in submersing themselves into their local communities and external world. Keeping in line with the notion of building an artist community through co-operative projects." [Is this last quote from Moore herself or some other source?] The quote is from the *Spoke* website

Although driven and focused on her development as an artist, Moore is quick to give credit to mentors like Mary Jane Jacob, a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, who helped her to understand the complexities of working within the confines of an institution.

US Fulbright Fellow

The next period in Moore's growth took her to Thessaloniki, Greece, in 2009 on a Fulbright Fellowship. That same year she took on the challenge of motherhood, but her family life, like her art life, was a collaborative arrangement. Thanks to her husband, who also has an art/sculpture background, she was able to accept the Fulbright, while he assumed the responsibilities of child care.

The Thessaloniki experience resulted in two collaborative exhibitions in 2010: *Push the Envelope*, held in Thessaloniki at the DYNAMO project-space, and at *Spoke*, in Chicago. They evolved from conversations generated among artists from Chicago, Athens, and

Thessaloniki. The Macedonian Museum of Modern Art hosted *The Space Between*, another synergetic exhibition that was a response to conversations developed during *Push the Envelope*. Given her penchant for multitasking, Moore served as project developer, organizer, and participant for each of these events.

Switching Priorities, Moving to Vermont

Moore was building a career in Chicago, and when she returned from Greece, she received a job offer from Columbia College. But her husband was from Stowe, Vermont, and he also had a job offer from LWI Metalworks doing architectural and custom metal fabrication. In some marriages, a moment like this could signal a parting of the ways, but Moore recognized it was time for her to make some concessions, so they made the leap and brought the family to Vermont. But being a stay-at-home mom was not in the cards for Moore.

Although there was no job opening at the Helen Day, a family friend gave Nathan Suter, who at that time was the executive director, a copy of Rachel Moore's résumé. He recognized Moore's extensive experience in community work as being ideally suited to the talents needed to curate *Exposed*, the high visibility outdoor exhibition/event put on every year at the Helen Day. He appointed Moore as an independent curator to run the exhibition.

It was at this event that I met Rachel Moore two years ago. The opening included a gala, outdoor dinner, with courses served at several locations, near sculptural works, sited throughout the town of Stowe. The weather that day was perfect. The crowd was large and enthusiastic. The atmosphere was definitely celebratory, and Moore was impressive in her role as ringmaster. She handed out maps to all the participants so we could find our way and sunglasses with "Exposed" printed on the rims to help us view the art in the blinding sun. Her pleasure in presenting each artist and his or her work (many who were there to speak to us directly) was infectious. The artists gave insightful answers to questions about their process, as the crowds migrated through town and then on down to the recreation path. At this point in 2014, Moore had assumed a permanent staff position as assistant director to Suter.

Bringing It All Together

The weather was not as cooperative for *Exposed 2016*: it rained. But Moore was undaunted; she moved the group into the main gallery and conducted the tour virtually on video. This year's event coincided with the announcement of Nathan Suter's departure and the appointment of Moore as the new director. She is clearly well prepared for the task and has ambitious plans for the future. Art literacy education is pivotal in Moore's programming for the Helen Day. Integrating art with the core curriculum is facilitated with teacher packets. Moore indicated that history, geography, politics, and even science and math can be taught using art as the jumping-off point.

Her own prolific art practice has continued: the results can be seen in not one but three recent or upcoming exhibitions. *A Journey Across Boundaries*, curated by Angelo Arnold and Gowri Savoor, opened at the Chandler Gallery in Randolph Vermont on June 18 and closed September 4. Moore is part of an upcoming group exhibit *Of Land & Local: Watershed*, showing in two venues. In its fourth year, this annual exhibit emphasizes site-

specific and place-based artwork. The show opens September 29, at Shelburne Farms, with a reception from 5 to 8 p.m., and closes on October 23, 2016. Work can also be seen at Burlington City Arts, the exhibit opening October 7 and closing January 14, 2017 (for more information, visit www.burlingtoncityarts.org/Exhibition/land-local-watershed).

While maintaining this very visible presence as an exhibiting artist, Moore is mindful of her role as a mom to two young kids, the oldest is now 7 with a 3-year-old-sibling. When asked how she does it, she responded, “I just always say ‘yes,’ and then work hard to make it happen.”