

Interview: Blake Shell takes the lead at Disjecta

By **Paul Sutinen**, www.orartswatch.org

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Blake Shell arrived in Portland about nine years ago. Her background included an M.F.A. in Photography from Savannah College of Art and Design and work as gallery curator/director at the University of Arizona. She soon became director of the Archer Gallery at Clark College (2009-2012) and then succeeded founding director Terri Hopkins at The Art Gym in 2013. She is now the new Executive Director at Disjecta (www.disjectaarts.org), one of the most adventurous art spaces in Portland.

This conversation occurred in April 12, on her second day at Disjecta.

You are the Executive Director. What do you see as your job, and what do you have other people doing?

I'll be overseeing the team and all aspects of the organization. I'm really in a place of thinking about strategic moves forward, the growth of the organization and working with the board to increase fundraising that can increase programming support for artists and all the things I've been interested in—as well as just making sure that things are happening in a strong way. There's a great staff here already.



“Oh Time Your Gilded Pages,” Disjecta, curated by curator-in-residence Michele Fiedler, artists Adriana Minoliti and Bobbi Woods/Photos by Mario Gallucci

The organization already has awesome programming. It already has things like the Curator-in-Residence program, which is really interesting—bringing a curator in to create an entire season of programs every year. We are currently in the sixth season of bringing in different curatorial voices from outside of the region to interact with artists and the arts community. The seventh season will start in the fall.

To bring programming here and to share information out to other areas about what’s happening here is a really important thing for any arts community, but particularly at this point in Portland’s history. Portland and Oregon artists are engaged in a national and international way.

How are the curators in residence chosen? Who does the choosing?

There is a call for curators to apply and to create proposals. They are selected by committee. I think it’s a combination of the board and staff. Then there’s the Biennial curator (Disjecta’s other big program). For the last Portland Biennial Michelle Grabner was the curator and she really was interested in regionalism, so she expanded the idea from the Portland Biennial to be an Oregon biennial. That’s another example of bringing in those outside voices. They think about things differently and it’s going to

change over time. The Biennial curator is invited—a process of getting nominations from artists, gallerists, community members, and just people who have been interested in Disjecta over time, to create a list of potential people.

Does the Curator-in-Residence program produce everything that goes on during the year or is there other programming?

There's partnered programming that is separate from the Curator-in-Residence programming. The Curator-in-Residence and the Biennial are the two main visual arts programs that are Disjecta created 100%. Disjecta also partners with cultural groups, schools, other arts organizations, and all sorts of different places to bring in other things throughout the year, so there are a lot of community-based and cultural-based events that happen that are separate from the Curator-in-Residence and the Biennial.

With your position at The Art Gym, you were the director, did fundraising, curated the exhibitions, managed the production of everything. Now that you're here, you're not doing the curatorial aspect.

I'm not doing any curatorial work at this point. I'm excited to have one particular role and to get to work with these other curators and staff, and to get to do the thing I was doing at The Art Gym while still wearing other hats. But I'm not opposed to doing curating in the future. I love curating, but I think that there's enough to do on the organizing and strategic and fundraising side of things that I'm happy that there's already amazing programming happening here. I'm in charge of getting the right people involved to make it happen.



Blake Shell is the new executive director at Disjecta.

You are the producer.

Right, and with an amazing production team.

Who's the team?

The team is Jessica Latham, who's the Gallery Manager. John Notarianni is in the new marketing role—that's an exciting one because that's a grant-funded position that has not happened before. Amy Theberge is the Events Coordinator. She works to bring in people from outside to rent parts of the space for events that help fund the program and the mission of Disjecta. She works on events with organizations, bringing in groups to do performances or readings or music or whatever.

How long were you at the Archer Gallery?

I was at the Archer Gallery for about three years.

And three years at The Art Gym. What about those experiences have prepared you for this position—what are the things that got the momentum going?

I had worked in a few smaller arts organizations that were nonprofit, but not within an institution, not an academic organization. They were much smaller scale. Throughout my time working in these different galleries and roles, I really built up my ability to deal with fundraising at the scale and organizing at this scale, larger productions, and things that I wasn't able to do at some of the smaller galleries. I think that it was really fortunate timing for me that this position happened at this time, because I'm ready for fundraising at the scale and also to think strategically about the next level that Disjecta can go to. I think that with every one of the jobs that I've had, I've increased the operating support through grants and donations. I've increased the programming around exhibitions. I worked to take each place to the next level.

Now you have the opportunity to be the ultimate person in charge. There's nobody between you and the board.

I think the board will have a lot of input on the strategic direction. It'll be a team effort, but the fact that I'll get to work with these amazing people who are supporting contemporary visual art here in Portland on the board—I think that all of the voices in the room are going to be important. But I have been reporting within academic institutions where the whole mission of the organization is not visual art.

There a lot of competing voices for the attention of the institution. Here your voice is the voice of the institution.

I'm working with everybody on it, but overall the whole voice, the mission, everything is making art happen here and to bring it to the arts community.



The salon-style hanging of part of the Portland2016 biennial at Disjecta, curated by Michelle Grabner./Courtesy of Disjecta

The Portland Art Museum has a lot of competing interests, and they've never been thought of as supportive of the local artist community. How would you like Disjecta to be thought of in terms of its relationship to local artists?

I think that Disjecta has a real strength because it has a combination of the Curator-in-Residence—who is not limited to show artists from this region, but often does connect with artists of the region by including them in a show or creating some programming around an exhibition—and there's the Biennial, so every other year there's a major endeavor to bring in a curator from outside to look at artists from this region. So the fact that there are the national and international components mixed in with the regional component feels like we're hitting all these things that I think are really important for any arts community, and for Portland in particular.

So you'd want to express a very conscious connection to the local artist community.

Absolutely. Engaging with the artist community through the Biennial, through bringing in different groups to see the Curator-in-Residence program, or to be connected in some way—there's already a great plan and a great history at Disjecta. I only want to see that expanded.

In that regard you instituted W.A.G.E. standards for artists' payments at The Art Gym. Will that be happening at Disjecta?

The Art Gym was the first organization in Oregon to self-certify and commit to paying fair wages standardized by Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.). I will be working on getting Disjecta certified now as well. Disjecta is already paying artists fees, which is great. I think certifying through W.A.G.E. shows a commitment to ongoing and fair pay to artists, and also, it helps create awareness for other organizations that there is a resource of standards for paying artists.

You arrived in Portland nine years ago.

Nine years in June.

In nine years you went from the Archer Gallery in Vancouver to The Art Gym, and now you're here. You've done a lot in nine years, moving up the responsibility ladder. You're really in charge of this institution. Was that your plan all along, to take over the Portland art community?

I came here without a job, with the plan to be here because I was really excited about the art community. I came from Tucson, the school of art galleries at the University of Arizona. I had been in Tucson a little too long. I was ready to go. I was really looking for a place that had an arts community that I could be excited about, that would be larger than what Tucson had. It would be a long-term place for me to connect with and grow in.

Actually I was involved in one of the first shows that happened in this building in the summer of 2008. I didn't know the history of Disjecta. I walked in and I thought, 'This is a really amazing space. I don't know what goes on here, but I want to know more.' That whole summer was like that for me. I was meeting people. People were showing me cool interesting spaces that were happening and also just connecting with me with people who wanted to see the Portland art community grow. I didn't walk into the Disjecta building saying, 'I'm going to run this in nine years,' but I knew that there was a community that was excited about people coming in and wanting to do stuff. It's worked out very well for me. I feel really fortunate because I could not have guessed at that point that I would get to do all the things that I've done.

It's always been my impression—of course I've been in Portland all my life—that the Portland art community is very easy to get connected with.

That's exactly right. Coming here, from just visiting. People are so generous with their time. That first summer everybody wanted to share information with me about what was going on, who I should meet, what event I should go to, or what organization I should want to check out if I was going to volunteer or look for work. It was really such a huge thing for me. I think it's a really special thing. It's not [that way] in every artist community.

So your advice for a person who wanted to connect today for their community would be to just go say “hi” to people and galleries will talk to you?

Absolutely. I think that's really true. If you know one person, talk to them about who else you should meet and get them to connect you and it grows out from there.

I've been really fortunate. The Art Gym had been with the same person for 30 something years and she retired and I was around and ready for that, and this transition happened at Disjecta, and I was around and ready for that. So I made the most of it. I was really lucky.

I always say that you need to be in the right place at the right time—but with the right stuff. At The Art Gym you took over from somebody who was running the institution for 33 years and your predecessor at Disjecta was here for 15 years—both founding directors. Do you have any thought about how you feel about that? Is there a special responsibility?

I think that there is a special responsibility. I think that you have to think of about that—not just from taking on an organization as the second director, but really coming into any organization that has a history and a community of supporters, people who care about what's going on there. You really have to take the time to really learn about the things that are going on, the people that are involved and the things that people cared deeply about, support those programs and keep those going. Then I think that you also have to think about how to change it and take it to the next level. That's a balance.



Karl Burkheimer's installation "In Site" at Disjecta/Courtesy of Disjecta

What do you think the next level is here at Disjecta?

Disjecta has so much potential. I'm working on that. I'm thinking about what it can be in in three years and what it can be in in 10 years. That's going to be informed by my ongoing conversations with the artists who've been involved here, the curators who have been involved here, volunteers, staff and the board, but the thing is, there's this beautiful giant space in North Portland that has amazing programming, that connects with local, regional, national and international arts communities, and I don't see any reason for there to be any limit at this point. I just think you can do more and grow if you have the financial stability and resources behind it to support artists, curators, and the arts community getting more programming around contemporary visual arts. But what that looks like will happen in a process that's really about the research and delving into what's been happening and what can add in in a nice way and be a good fit.

What are you thinking about raising the national/international profile of the institution like Blue Sky has done with photography world?

I think that Disjecta is primed and ready for that because it already has connections with the curators outside the region. I think getting more and more on the national radar, doing increased distribution of catalogs of past programs and, with this new marketing position, building up knowledge of Disjecta throughout the country and internationally.

What does Disjecta need to do to do that?

Clarity around the programming that Disjecta provides and the fact that it gives this platform for emerging and mid-career curators well as artists, making it clear to people what Disjecta does, having a very succinct mission statement that everyone can understand and a website that has all that information. I'd really like for there to be a consolidation of the brand in a way that I've done before at other organizations where everything is just really worked out—how it's going to look, how it's going to sound. I'd like to do that for Disjecta, too. There's work to do with marketing and design.

When do you think we should be looking at Disjecta and ask, “Did Blake Shell get it together and do some amazing things” Six months? A year? Wait three years? When will we say, “That’s Blake’s vision coming to fruition”?

I think that you'll see some immediate things happen as I work on marketing and fundraising, but I'm going to be working with the board on lots of things that will unfold over the next two years and then hopefully just ongoing—always looking to what Disjecta can grow into and taking it there.