

Sarah Shalgosky AGM Guest Speaker



'Eminent speaker' and 'I was sitting on the edge of my seat to hear what next...' aren't phrases customarily associated with AMA talks, however enjoyable and informative. But, for the AGM, we were privileged to a rare treat – a talk by Sarah Shalgosky, who has been Curator of the Mead Gallery, the art gallery of the University of Warwick, since 1993, and now has increased responsibility as Curator for the University. With modesty and good humour, punctuated by the occasional peal of laughter, Sarah took us on a whistlestop tour of the University of Warwick, its gallery and art collections, of her collection and acquisition policies, of her curation practice and its wider applications, and, above all, of the transformative power of art itself.

Sarah began with background. The University of Warwick (f. 1965) was, along with the other six universities that together comprise the 'Shakespearean Seven', essentially a product of the Robbins Report (1963), with its watchword of opening up education to all. The modernist architecture of the campus was informed by an aesthetic of equality, referencing neither the past nor wealth. From the first, the University collected modern art, albeit according to an ethic that changed in tune with the times. In the 1970s, for example, it began to collect smaller works, placing them in new buildings designed on a domestic scale. When such small works include, for example, the prints of Terry Frost, bought for what now seems a ludicrously small price, we begin to get a sense of the visionary inspiration behind the politics of acquisition. In the 1980s a culture of professionalism ran hand in hand with the acquisition of abstract works, including prints – and an involved an extraordinary leap of faith. This was the construction of the Mead gallery, consciously modelled on the Museum of Art in the University of Wisconsin (renamed in recent times as the Chazen Museum of Art) – even down to the white carpet on the walls, intended, so it was said, to disguise the screwholes left after changes of display. That white carpet is no more, at least in Warwick – yet one more Herculean task dealt with by a versatile and energetic curator who, in an earlier career, repainted the walls of the Herbert (Coventry) –

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which she found had been painted in a fetching brown and cream – the colours, so she was told of the Great Western Railway – which history fails to tell ever ran through Coventry! Her own first ever task appears to have been an aptitude test. She was presented with a screwdriver (young women, of course, aren't supposed to be able to use such things) and a packing case. Can you open that? Of course she could. Inside – a Picasso; and the encouragement and inspiration to pursue a career in art.

The Mead Gallery was, from the first, conceived as a major art space. Its three white cubes, arranged in an 'L' shape, predicated an immersive experience, in contrast with the didactic narratives typical of the architecture and hanging policies of so many large galleries. These days, the Mead Gallery is open as an art space only in term time; in vacation it is let commercially to, for example, Trade Fairs, which brings in a significant income. That does not mean that art disappears – under Sarah's guidance art extends well beyond the gallery walls, including the creation of a publicly accessible sculpture park displaying both modern sculpture and installations. Sarah is only the second Curator in the gallery's history. She was lead representative for a consortium of galleries from across the UK to obtain lottery funding for new commissions, and has led an innovative programme of exhibitions, commissions, publications, and public engagement in art. Passionate about the power of art to change lives, she was particularly proud of a programme that worked creatively with children from some of the most deprived and disadvantaged schools in England. 'Take Part in Art' was hands on; but over this the 'Warwick Way' has become a key tool for engaging students with art – Look at it – What does it make you think about? How was it made/done? Why is it here? In short, four questions that are a way of empowering the student, who may never have been in a gallery before, to take time to stop, think, internalise, engage, respond, discuss – even, metaphorically speaking, sit in the driving seat in a far more egalitarian and encouraging way than that of downwardly cascaded art education.

The Mead Gallery is part Arts Council funded, which brings both opportunities and constraints – and, of course, frequent changes in wallcolour occasioned by the modern use of video and installation art. In the group of institutions with which the gallery is associated, the Mead has responsibility for International exhibitions encompassing the full spectrum of modern art. Sarah showed us catalogues of some recent exhibitions, including the much praised 'The Indiscipline of Painting' (2012), a celebration of fifty years of abstract painting, and a collaboration between the Mead and Tate St Ives. To hear Sarah talk about abstraction as 'lived experience' in, for example, the work of Ian Davenport, or Bridget Riley, for whom Venice was the unexpected touchstone to a change in her entire colour palette, was fascinating. But when Sarah's talk turned to new commissions she held her already captivated audience both spellbound and completely energised.

Her first lotteryfunded commission was Simon Patterson's Cosmic Wallpaper (2002), which has become an important installation in the Sociology building. Sociology makes and creates links using language, and explores them by means of diagrams. Fired by these ideas, Patterson also subverts them, renaming the constellations of the heavens to provide a history of the rock band, Deep Purple. The result is incredibly beautiful: and the art itself is owned by the community. Another commission is still in the making. This is intended for the Life Sciences department. Discussions with students, staff, and other interested parties showed that, above all, the students were concerned about sustainability, and the discussions became the powerhouse

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informing Sarah's curatorial choices. She settled on Julia Lohmann, a Germanborn artist who works in London, including a recent residency at the V & A. For Warwick, Julia will be working with kelp – a sustainable resource which can grow up to 6 metres in a season – as David Dewis, who dives off Wales, leapt in to testify. For Warwick, Julia will be marrying the kelp with bamboo, another fast growing and sustainable resource. Whilst the result will undoubtedly be beautiful, employing laser cut patterns that mimic the structures of nature as studied within Life Sciences, and filtering intricate patterns of light through a mesh of kelp supported by bamboo, the experiments with the material set off an extraordinary chain reaction. The engineering department was asked to experiment and help with laser cutting – but could kelp become a covering from aircraft wings rather than polluting carbon fibre? And, from the medics, could kelp artificial skin assist student surgeons, through hands on learning, to suture well? Julia herself makes hats, clothing, lampshades, and sculptures from kelp and other seemingly unlikely materials, including cow stomachs. Sarah handed round a few worked kelp samples which were variously stroked, marvelled at, held to the light for their soft and changeable green, and considered for use within our own artistic practices.

This was an extraordinary talk by an extraordinary woman, and we are hugely indebted to Sarah. Arriving promptly, she even sat through our AGM with grace, a smile, and the odd supportive comment!

We owe thanks, too, to Moira Lamont – for inviting Sarah to speak, for organising our horticultural thanks to Sarah, who is a passionate gardener; and for the delicious canapés, happily consumed in the interval between the AGM and Sarah's talk.
