

CURATING IN TEXAS

By Caitlin Greenwood – December 10, 2015



Brigid McCaffrey's *Paradise Springs* (2013), Still.
Photo by Alex Marks. Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa.

It comes as a surprise to no one that Texas is expansive; it may set the standard for the most vast, dynamic social ecosystem in the U.S. Texas politics are a moving target; music is forever evolving. And the arts scene, which has ebbed and flowed, often existing insularly within major cities, is donning a new perspective. In an environment that has often lauded and championed men in a director role, more museums, galleries and institutions are actively placing women in positions of power. With that comes a shift in programming and ultimately, a shift toward making the arts world more inclusive.

For the second in our series spotlighting female curators in Texas, Caitlin Greenwood spoke with Laura Copelin of Ballroom Marfa about her retreat to the desert, her approach to curating, and her aspirations for the state's art climate. Copelin and the Ballroom Marfa staff have a busy 2016 ahead of them, including their Marfa Myths program—a three-day cultural

event—and a group exhibition in collaboration with NYC-based artist Dan Colen, both taking place during March.

A+C TX: What brought you to Ballroom Marfa?

LAURA COPELIN: I came to Ballroom Marfa after four years at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. I love the form of the *kunsthalle*, which is comprised of rotating contemporary exhibitions not weighed down by a permanent collection. SMMoA and Ballroom Marfa loosely share this model. Many things intrigued me about Ballroom—the major works commissioned by living artists, the landscape of Far West Texas, and the multidisciplinary nature of the program—are just a few.

How would you describe your curatorial style? What mediums are you most drawn to?



Laura Copelin.
Photo by Alex Marks.

I am not drawn to a specific medium and like to see artists explore many different modes and identities. It is wonderful to see the cross-pollination of ideas that happen with different collisions or collaborations. I find I am particularly inspired when art and science interact. Each field has such distinct methods for understanding the world and representing reality, when they make contact it is often mutually generative and expansive.

For example, we just hosted a weekend of screenings and events for the seventh year of Artists' Film International, our collaboration with Whitechapel Gallery and twelve other international partners. This year, I selected a work by filmmaker Brigid McCaffrey, *Paradise Springs*, a stunning portrait of geologist/naturalist Ren Lallatin.

We complemented the film program by offering a geology walk and lecture focused on desert geology, vulcanology, and geomicrobiology by Ren and a local geologist. Both the collaboration between filmmaker and geologist evident in the video and the response of poets and artists in Marfa to the geology walk were incredibly gratifying.

How do you feel like that style works within the mission statement of Ballroom Marfa?

The program at Ballroom Marfa keeps a dynamic mix of visual art, film, music and performance active and encourages art production across all media. This along with ambitious initiatives like Marfa Dialogues, which publicly explores the intersection of art, politics, culture, and climate change, supports a truly multidisciplinary environment.

The high arts world is often deemed exclusive. Do you feel like that still rings true? I think that homogeneity is still present but this also seems to be changing significantly, especially when you're looking at contemporary art. The elite art world is international and there are so many art worlds besides the ivory tower. Currently, it seems that vast economic inequity is one of the biggest threats to the scope and diversity of practices represented or sustained in urban centers and major institutions.

How do you, as a female curator within an arts organization run by a mostly-female staff, approach changing that perspective? Being in a space run by (mostly) women feels natural to me. I was mentored by Elsa Longhauser at SMMoA, now Susan Sutton and Fairfax Dorn at Ballroom, even in art school, artists like Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly, Eve Fowler, Catherine Opie, and Andrea Fraser had tremendous sway over my education. I was just given a shirt by a beloved colleague from the Otherwild shop in Los Angeles that reads "The Future is Female"—it rings true in my experience!