

## FAIRFAX DORN

By Lilly Slezak, Sarah Cascone – August 17, 2011



Fairfax Dorn is the executive director and co-founder of Ballroom Marfa, the arts venue in a converted dancehall in the idyllic town popularized by Donald Judd. The space has two galleries and is a contemporary cultural arts space which hosts art exhibitions as well as music performances. Ballroom Marfa is currently bringing a drive-in movie theater to the community. “AutoBody,” curated by Neville Wakefield, is the next show; upcoming exhibition, “Carbon,” engages a debate over climate change. To date the venue has presented 25 exhibitions featuring over 160 emerging and established artists.

You’re a Texas native. How has Texas affected the way you see art?

I was born in San Antonio but grew up in Corpus Christi for those elementary years. My family moved to Denver where I attended high school. From Colorado, I was missing Texas, so my college years were spent at the University of Texas at Austin, where I concen-

trated on painting and art history.

Texas is a vast, expansive place and the arts play a critical role for the entire state. The remoteness and small population of Marfa attributes to both the beauty and hardship of being based here. The landscape is so profound that it leaves you feeling humble but full of possibilities.

How was Ballroom Marfa conceived? What were your initial goals?

Ballroom Marfa was conceived with my best friend, Virginia Lebermann. Though both native Texans, we met in 1998 while living in New York City. In 2002 we went to live in Terlingua, a ghost town near the U.S.-Mexico border. We found ourselves driving two hours north to Marfa to see the amazing Marfa Book Company, dine at the newly opened restaurant there, visit the Chinati and Judd Foundations and listen to the Lannan Foundation writers talk about their work. After a few visits, we saw there was room for more in Marfa and wanted to create a space where art, film, and music could be experienced amidst the rural landscape.

How has the organization grown or changed since it opened in 2003?

Over the past eight years, we have increasingly come to focus on commissioning new, site-specific works. There is a powerful artistic freedom implicit in works commissioned by non-profits as opposed to commercial galleries. The funding of projects without any expectation of economic compensation infuses the working relationship between Ballroom and the artists with a certain intimacy. We provide the artists with site-visits to Marfa and cover all material expenses. Most of these artists produce the work in Marfa.

For example, after her first site-visit, Erin Shirreff decided she wanted to use compressed ash from around the town for her Untitled sculpture series that was part of Immaterial. The Ballroom Marfa staff collected ash for two months before she returned to build the sculptures. After the exhibition, these works traveled to the MCA in Denver, and then will go to SCAD in Savannah.

Are Ballroom Marfa's operations devoted equally to film, music and visual art? How are the three prongs organized?

Our Director of Music curates our concert series, and we incorporate music into our public programs. We have presented over 80 concerts in Marfa, and annually we host up to ten concerts that feature a wide range of musical formats: cult favorites, singer songwriters, young artists from experimental and indie rock, and modern classical masters. We have hosted performers as varied as Spoon, Jeff Tweedy, Grizzly Bear, Animal Collective, Jenny Lewis, Mingo Saldivar, Yeasayer, Patty Griffin, Terry Allen, Sharon Isbin, Bruce Livingston, Bon Iver and Billy Joe Shaver.

We have presented the work of over 95 filmmakers, with screenings and curated series presented throughout the year. We have commissioned several new works by artists such as Laleh Khorramian, Teresa Margolles and Meredith Danluck. In 2010, we presented *The Reading*, a professionally staged screenplay

that was selected from among the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting.

For the last seven years, you've been working to install a drive-in movie theater. What's the goal, and the hold-up?

The project has been in the works for almost seven years, and we've recently received a significant grant from the NEA to help with the development of the drive-in project. Designed by architects MOS (Hilary Sample and Michael Meredith), the concept for this project is to resurrect a virtually extinct type of venue and rekindle the spirit of community that existed around original drive-in theaters—though the project expands beyond the outdoor theater model as the design includes a screen and a band shell. We are currently exploring a public partnership with Presidio County and working on fundraising.

Can you talk about your "special projects" and "education & outreach" programs?

Ballroom Marfa's mission is two-fold: artistic expression and civic engagement. Through our education and outreach program, every visiting artist, musician and filmmaker gives lectures, participates in radio interviews, or speaks with area students. Because while access to broader, international exposure is paramount to our mission, we also want to reach into our local community—inviting everyone to experience our programs and stimulate creative thinking.

One of my favorite educational programs is our annual DJ Camp. At this five-day summer program, students learn directly on DJ equipment and experiment with mixing songs and sampling music. Our instructors also present DJing as an art form with a rich culture and history, with portions of each class covering the history of the DJ and art projects inspired by each student's sound style and DJ persona.