

NEWS

Contemporary art and music fixture Ballroom Marfa revels in 20-year anniversary



Astrid Terrazas, "Su estomago canta canciones de búsqueda." Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa.

BY MARY CANTRELL

OCTOBER 4, 2023 8:43 PM

MARFA — 840. That is the number of artists — visual artists, musicians, filmmakers and more — contemporary arts organization Ballroom Marfa has collaborated with since its inception 20 years ago in 2003.

The occasion, and reflecting on the museum's widespread impact, has founders Virginia Lebermann and Fairfax Dorn awestruck. "None of us can believe it's been 20 years," said Lebermann.

"When we started we considered the project an experiment in and of itself," she added. "I think we quickly learned that it was an interesting continuation of a contemporary conversation that Judd had already started, but we never realized how much that local conversation would resonate globally."

Dorn said the Ballroom Marfa team has “made the impossible possible,” on many levels in order to bring installations such as Elmgreen & Dragset’s *PRADA MARFA* and Haroon Mirza’s *stone circle* to life. Its role as an incubator for artists and musicians through residency programs is particularly vital, she said, and has shaped the museum into what it is today.

“The influences and experiences we have created over the past 20 years seem to have created this very special place for artists — for artists to be nourished, to be recognized, for artists to have a voice,” said Dorn.



Kiki Smith, “Teeth Fountain.” Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa.

This weekend, Ballroom Marfa will open its latest exhibition, *Perhaps the Truth*, in its 1920s-era ballroom which remains open to the public for free year-round. The group show, which kicks off a year-long anniversary celebration, was curated by Dorn and consists primarily of paintings and sculptures. It was inspired by the writing of Wallace Stevens and late painter and poet Jesse Murry.

Artists involved include Murry, Alejandro Piñeiro Bello, Jes Fan, Joel Gaitan, Florian Krewer, Rebecca Manson, Ruben Ulises Rodriguez Montoya, Robert Nava, Ilana Savdie, Kiki Smith, Astrid Terrazas, Lucía Vidales and Issy Wood.

“The show that Fairfax curated is tremendous,” said Lebermann. “It feels big and bold and super sexy.”

Perhaps the Truth opens Friday evening from 7 to 10 p.m. Dos Santos, a psychedelic rock band with Latin influences, will perform in the courtyard at 9 p.m. An after party will take place at The Capri at 10 p.m. featuring a DJ set by Daniel Villareal. On Saturday, a curator-led walkthrough of the show and poetry readings from Arden Wohl and Emmy Pérez will occur from noon to 1:30 p.m.



Alejandro Piñeiro Bello, “Mar Insolado,” oil on linen. Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa.

In a continuation of the 20th anniversary bash, *Mariposa Relámpago*, an epic sculpture in the form of a tricked-out bus by Guadalupe Maravilla that deals with topics of migration and healing, will open in the courtyard on Saturday, November 4, with a sound ceremony. Maravilla will also paint a mural at Ballroom and the bus will travel to Austin, Dallas and Houston for subsequent exhibitions.

A 20th anniversary book, to be released in Spring 2024, highlighting Ballroom Marfa’s rich history of visual art, musical programming, commissions and more, is also in production. Among the myriad stand-outs include the 2004 exhibition *Optimo: Manifestations of Optimism in Contemporary Art*, the museum’s first group show including artists Takashi Murakami, Leo Villareal, Karen Finley and more that helped put Ballroom on the map.

Noteworthy is also the 2008 installation *Hello Meth Lab in the Sun* by artists Jonah Freeman, Justin Lowe, and Alexandre Singh, the first large-scale work to transform the entire museum space. And Marfa Myths, a beloved annual music festival in partnership with Mexican Summer record label, which ran from 2015 to 2019.

Ballroom's contributions to the local music scene were emphasized by both founders. Lebermann recalled how early on they would host shows with musicians traveling through town at Ray's, an earlier iteration of The Lost Horse, and how the history of performances can be told through old posters.



Joel Gaitan, "It's My House and I Live Here." Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa.

"It's really striking, who came through before they were known," said Lebermann. "Jeff Tweedy, while he was quite well known, played for 200 people at the Liberty Hall. I think we got to see people and meet people, and the community engaged with music that they wouldn't have otherwise."

Vance Knowles, Ballroom's founding music director, fondly recalled Tweedy asking them to "light him like a campfire" for his performance. He said the musical artists they hosted — which now total around 200 over the past two decades — harken back to a freer time in Marfa, where time seemed to stand still, creating the perfect environment for music.

“When you finally arrive in Marfa, you are half out of your senses,” said Knowles. “To go to see a concert here, it’s the perfect mind and body experience. To be in that state and to hear music you’ve heard so many times before, by artists you’ve never seen in a place like Marfa, it’s like a Wild West medicine show.”

That legacy continues with *The Father Place*, the museum’s music residency outlet, as well as the annual DJ camps that Ballroom hosts as a part of Summer Shake Up, activities for local kids.

While Lebermann and Dorn weren’t sure exactly what the next 20 years of Ballroom Marfa would entail, they expressed gratitude to the town and the many hands that have been involved with the organization, from the staff, artists, supporters and more.

“Without any one of those elements [Ballroom] wouldn’t even exist,” said Dorn. “I’m so grateful for everyone who’s come together to make it even possible.”

Executive Director and Curator Daisy Nam said running a nonprofit arts organization in remote Far West Texas isn’t without its challenges, but the artist-driven mission of the museum is rewarding and helps propel it forward.

“I think the artists are the ones who make it and let it continue,” said Nam “Because they always just continually have really interesting ideas that we can’t resist.”