

INTERVIEW

Nicholas Baume

With Laura Addison

On April 16, the New Mexico Museum of Art opens *Art on the Edge 2010* (see On Exhibit, page 30), the second biennial juried show organized by the Friends of Contemporary Art (FOCA). This year's guest juror is Nicholas Baume, who has consistently broken new ground as a contemporary art curator, organizing exciting exhibitions and curatorial projects, starting a collection for one museum, and introducing international artists to an American audience. Baume will give a free public lecture during the *Art on the Edge* opening on April 16 at 6 PM in St. Francis Auditorium.



Nicholas Baume
Photo by John Kennard

Hailing from Sydney, Australia, Baume came to the United States in 1998 to be contemporary curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Among his projects there were *About Face: Andy Warhol Portraits* and *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*. His *Matrix* series of exhibitions included first American museum shows by Francis Alÿs, Sam Durant, Thomas Eggerer, Christian Jankowski, Catherine Sullivan, and Fiona Tan.

In 2003 Baume was appointed chief curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. There he shaped the artistic program, establishing a permanent collection and the *Momentum* project series. Baume's *Super Vision*, a twenty-seven-artist international exhibition, inaugurated the ICA's award-winning building, by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, in 2006. Baume also curated ICA exhibitions of the work of Kai Althoff, Kader Attia, Carol Bove, Gerard Byrne, Tara Donovan (with Jen Mergel), Thomas Hirschhorn (with Ralph Rugoff), Anish Kapoor, and Lucy McKenzie.

The most recent chapter in Baume's career, as chief curator and director of New York's Public Art Fund, began in September 2009. *El Palacio* caught up with Baume in between art fairs, board meetings, and the important work of setting the direction for Public Art Fund.

Addison: You are from Australia, but came to the US in 1998 to work at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. What compelled you to look across the ocean for curatorial opportunities? How would you compare the contemporary-art milieu of the two continents?

Baume: It was all very fortuitous rather than the result of a determined job search. A friend recommended me for the job and they invited me for an interview. I was very lucky. There is a very vibrant scene in Australia, including Sydney, where I'm from. There are very serious artists, galleries, collectors, and museums. Of course it is a much smaller population, so you don't get the kind of critical mass that you do here in the US.



Peter Coffin *Sculpture Silhouette (A. Rodin, The Thinker, 1880)*, 2007.

On view at City Hall Park, October 1, 2009–May 2010.

Artworks courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris; and Herald St, London.

Photo by James Ewing, courtesy of Public Art Fund.



Olafur Eliasson *The New York City Waterfalls (Brooklyn Bridge at night)*, 2008.
Commissioned by Public Art Fund © Olafur Eliasson, 2008.
Photo by Julienne Schaefer.

Addison: You had a rare opportunity as chief curator at ICA Boston to not only set the exhibition program but also to open a new facility—thus setting the tone and starting a museum collection to boot. What were your objectives for the exhibition program at ICA? What were the most successful shows you did there and why?

Baume: Our objectives were to build on the tradition of the ICA at its best, as a center of innovation with a program of international significance, and at the same time to welcome new audiences and open the experience of contemporary art to a broad public. Exhibitions including *Super Vision*, *Anish Kapoor*, and *Tara Donovan* all worked on those levels. At the same time, I am very proud of the exhibitions we did at the old building, which were also very memorable, including extraordinary shows by Kai Althoff and Thomas Hirschhorn.

Addison: Most curators inherit an existing collection. How does one begin the job of building a museum collection from scratch? How did you define the scope of the ICA Boston collection?

Baume: The idea of starting a collection with the new building preceded my tenure, so my job was to realize that goal. The policy mandated a tight focus, collecting only the work of artists who had shown at the ICA. That way the collection would become a kind of biography of the museum's exhibition program. It was a great way to launch a collection with limited resources and make it distinctive and relevant.

Addison: One of the things you did at ICA Boston was to begin a series focusing on regional artists. Do you think it's important for a curator to balance the regional and the international? If so, why?

Baume: I think it all comes down to the mission of the museum and its role in the community. At the ICA, having the Foster Prize for Boston area artists brought great energy into the program and engaged local artists with the museum in a way that would have been much harder without it.

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Addison: You recently started a new job as chief curator and director at Public Art Fund in New York. Tell us a little about the organization and its mission.

Baume: A private organization founded in 1977, the Public Art Fund has presented the work of hundreds of artists in the public spaces of New York City. Our projects are usually temporary exhibitions and new commissions conceived for our regular venues, such as Rockefeller Center, City Hall Park, and Doris Freedman Plaza in Central Park, and for unique locations in the public domain, such as Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfalls* in the East River. I will talk about the new program I am developing for the Public Art Fund at my lecture when I come to Santa Fe for the *Art on the Edge* opening in April.



Franz West *The Ego and the Id*, 2008.

On view at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, July 15, 2009–Spring 2010.

Courtesy of the collection of Amalia Dayan and Adam Lindemann.

Photo by James Ewing, courtesy of Public Art Fund.

Addison: What are the specific challenges facing the director of an art nonprofit today?

Baume: We all face a tough economic environment where funding is fiercely competitive. This is also a great discipline that forces us to question the status quo and find new ways of maximizing the impact we are able to have with limited resources.

Addison: Do you often jury exhibitions? If so, what do you enjoy about them? If not, why did you choose to jury *Art on the Edge*?

Baume: Not often, but it is a great way to see a lot of unfamiliar work in a very concentrated way. This invitation was hard to resist since I have never been to New Mexico and am very curious about the regional culture and landscape.

Addison: Can you describe the idea(s) or theme(s) that run through your selections for *Art on the Edge*? What inspired your choices? And what can visitors expect when they come to see the show?

Baume: My choices were very intuitive and personal, and in that way probably add up to a consistency of feeling that is less thematic than it is subjective. Visitors can expect to see strong bodies of work by each artist, beautifully installed in the museum's galleries.

Addison: What is the most rewarding aspect of being a curator for you? What qualities do you think a curator needs to possess to be successful and engaging? How would you advise someone interested in becoming a curator to proceed?

Baume: There is nothing like the thrill of working with brilliantly talented artists and seeing their work shared with the public. There are many different ways to be a successful curator, so I don't believe there is one kind of personality that works best. I think it is important to have a solid grounding in a particular field of knowledge; art history and philosophy have been most useful to me. One has to be able to work sensitively with creative people and be able to translate their ideas for a broad audience. At the same time it helps to have a practical sense of how to get things done on time and on budget. Working in this field is not easy, since there are not all that many positions. That said, I would encourage anybody who is passionate about being a curator to pursue it. Writing exhibition reviews and catalog texts helped me to get started, as did working part time in a commercial gallery while I was studying. It was a great way to meet artists and develop a network, which is invaluable. ■

Art on the Edge 2010 is on view at the New Mexico Museum of Art from April 16 through August 1, 2010.

Laura Addison is the curator of contemporary art at the New Mexico Museum of Art. Her next exhibition, opening August 2010, will consider the recent paintings of Taos artist Johnnie Winona Ross.