

Liz Armstrong

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Lorser Feitelson, *Magical Space Forms*, 1953. Orange County Museum of Art

During a recent tour of the Orange County Museum of Art, the new chief curator, Liz Armstrong, displayed a mentor-style sensibility. She was intelligent, informed about world affairs, as well as about art, friendly and engaged. She drew the attendees into dialogue while helping them understand more about art than they previously did. She was also unassuming. One of her comments: "Art is completely subjective. My personal job is to expand my own subjectivity."

Talking about a work with cosmic images, Armstrong says, "Art changed forever after the dropping of the atomic bomb." It will be interesting to see what she says about the impact of Sept. 11 on the future of art. In her previous positions, Armstrong has been visionary while creating groundbreaking exhibitions. Now she is bringing a new level of

culture and understanding of art to Orange County.

Armstrong started at OCMA in April. She was previously at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, La Jolla, where she curated the acclaimed show, "Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art." Within six months at OCMA, she has made significant new art acquisitions, hired a curator of contemporary art, and re-installed the museum's permanent collection. Where the collection was a loosely chronological/historical exhibition of California art, the current collection is more national and international in scope. The works-through their juxtapositions and explanations-can help to teach viewers about various styles of art.

The most striking of the new works is a science-fiction type polyurethane sculpture. "Supernova" by the Korean artist Lee Bul is a huge hanging creature that is part insect, part human, part plant. It is stunning, shocking and informative about the current state of art, and could be called a metaphor for Armstrong as curator.

She is also passionate about a borrowed work in the collection by Marcel Duchamp, who she says is one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Standing in front of his reproduction of Mona Lisa, with mustache and goatee, Armstrong says, "Duchamp believed that any object in everyday life could be art." She added that he made art accessible and began to change the way people think about art.

Armstrong explains, "I love working with art (and artists) because it constantly challenges my assumptions and expectations. To really engage with a good work of art, you often stretch your mind. My goal as a curator is to present art that broadens horizons, enlightens, provokes, and turns people's perspectives upside down. I am interested in art that provides pleasure, while it ultimately offers us a new way of thinking about ourselves and about our world. I am interested in the 'muse' in museum-in creating a place where we can have a variety of experiences and explore the very human capacity for wonder. Sometimes art can do that on its own, but one of the roles of a museum curator is to provide a context that assists viewers in engaging with works."

Armstrong devotes her life to art in its various aspects and permutations and in its ability to spark openness, change and dialogue in viewers. Her position at OCMA enables her to do that and to personally engage in dialogues with artists and with others in the art world. She works with passion and with wisdom, but has time and energy left for her two daughters and her many friends. Professionals in the Southern California art world expect Liz Armstrong to push OCMA to new heights in the years ahead.

(Armstrong is now Executive Director of the Palm Springs Art Museum.)

Liz Goldner