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Nasher's chief curator extends vision

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Recess interviews Nasher's new chief curator Trevor Schoonmaker

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BY SID GOPINATH
THE CHRONICLE

Trevor Schoonmaker joined the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University as the founding contemporary curator in 2006. Prior to that, Schoonmaker worked as an independent curator in New York. Schoonmaker was recently promoted to the newly-created position of chief curator at the Nasher. Recess's Sid Gopinath sat down with Schoonmaker to discuss the transition from independent to museum curation and his vision for the future of the Nasher.

R: To start off, what got you to this point?

TS: As an undergrad, I studied art history at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. I grew up in Winston-Salem. I went to University of Michigan-Ann Arbor for graduate school. There, I was working on a Ph.D. in art history, focusing on contemporary African art in the mid '90s. One thing that happened while I was there was that my advisor, who was from Ghana, did not get tenure after four years into my studies. That gave me an opportunity to re-think what I was trying to achieve. And I realized that a Ph.D. really wasn't for me because I knew I wanted to curate. So I left!

I went to New York, and the first thing I did was I started working in commercial galleries in Chelsea. Working in the commercial gallery environment is a fantastic learning experience because everyone filters through there. All the artists, all the collectors, all the curators, all the museum directors, the whole art world globally passes through. You can quickly learn who is who and how things work in the contemporary art world ecosystem.

The gallery I worked for, Brent Sikkema, allowed me to curate my first show, which was in the summer of 2000. I'd been thinking about a show around Fela Kuti, this Nigerian musician and activist who died in '97, who was very prominent in the '70s and '80s. I pursued this show and basically naively quit my job at the gallery because I was trying to do this in the evenings and on weekends, and it just wasn't enough time. The show turned out to be very successful, and some opportunities came my way because of that.

Then [the Nasher] opportunity presented itself and turned out it was an amazing experience. To be here and to join the staff shortly after the museum opened, was really exciting.

R: Compared to being an independent curator, what's it like being a curator at a museum?

TS: It's completely different. The analogy might be a writer who is at home, writing his or her novel. You know, you're doing exactly what you want to do. You're completely focused. As opposed to, say, a beat writer for a magazine or a newspaper. Your voice comes through, your idea comes through, but you're part of a larger institution. You have a lot of administrative, managerial responsibilities. And so that's been the larger challenge: finding time to do the research, the reading, the writing.

R: What did the contemporary curator position entail?

TS: Thinking about what shows we want to curate ourselves, what artists we want to put forth, what shows we might consider from other institutions and then building a collection. It's really more about personal relationships. If you know the artists, museum curators and directors and the gallery directors, then they will start to get an idea of what you're interested in, and they will eventually start presenting things to you. It's been a big benefit to us.

R: What is the difference now that you are chief curator?

TS: It's really shifting to more managerial duties and being in charge of the department and division, rather than just being a significant player on the team. We have a new director, so it's working very closely with her to determine our vision for the future.

R: What is your vision for the future of the Nasher?

TS: One thing we will see is a little bit more attention on our collection. We've been very exhibition-focused, which has been great for me, because I love doing these shows. But, at the same time, we've been building a fantastic contemporary art collection. So we're going to more frequently have the contemporary collection on view, which is good in a lot of ways. We're paying attention to a lot of younger artists and artists who've been maybe a little overlooked by either



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Trevor Schoonmaker studied art history at UNC before becoming the chief curator of the Nasher Museum of Art.

the marketplace or critics. One example would be Barkley Hendricks. We organized his retrospective in 2008. Now, he's recognized as one of the great American artists because people just hadn't had [previous] access to see his work.

R: How does the Nasher fit into the Durham and the Duke community? Is it fitting the way you want it to?

TS: We always want to do more, and we always want to do better, but the engagement with students and faculty and the administration is tremendous, and we're really thrilled. We also have a strong, robust program of teaching. Not only professors teaching classes in the museum, but also bringing students to the museum's storage. With the Durham community, we're also very pleased. We're really happy because we feel like we've brought in audiences that, prior to the Nasher's existence, maybe didn't have much interaction with the university. The museum has a very university-focused mission, but it also has a public mission. We do a lot of programs for the larger community, and we've become sort of the de facto regional museum just by virtue of being here and doing what we do.



Schoonmaker poses alongside Wangechi Mutu, an artist and sculptor who previously had her works displayed at the Nasher last spring.

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