

Roswell Daily Record

— The Voice of the Pecos Valley Online



Tuesday, February 03, 2009

1/17/2009 5:59:00 PM

Laurie Rufe: There's nothing like the West

Laurie Rufe, director of the Roswell Museum and Art Center, may have been born and raised in Pennsylvania, but she says her heart is here.

Even in the museum collection, it's the New Mexico pieces that speak to her. Asked to pick out a favorite, she settled, after much thought, on a 1920 painting by Marsden Hartley titled "Landscape, New Mexico."

Aside from the slightly abstract style, which is infused with some of the trends taking hold on the East Coast at the time, the detail that attracts her most is the puffy white clouds floating over the mountains.

"There will be many days when you look out your window and go, 'Oh, this is a Marsden Hartley day,'" she said.

Rufe has moved all over the country, from Pennsylvania to Virginia to Wyoming before heading south. She says her journey started when her husband Mike "got the wanderlust," and the two headed West.

"I love the West," Rufe said. "There's nothing like it. When I go back East now, I feel very closed in when I can't see the horizon."

Twenty-two years ago, Rufe saw a listing for an assistant directorship in Roswell, and jumped at the chance. RMAC was already a solid museum, and had an extensive collection of contemporary art. The museum was started in 1937 as a Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project during the Great Depression, which created jobs for thousands of artists across the country. So from the very beginning, the museum had a solid collection of regional art.

"I think that it just sort of mushroomed with the leadership of the museum locally," Rufe said.

RMAC has always been dependent on support from collectors and artists. As the museum grew, it received donations of top-quality Western and contemporary art. Rufe pointed to a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe, "Ram's Skull with Brown Leaves," which is one of O'Keeffe's strongest pieces in her skull series. She said there was no way the museum could have paid for it.

"We really don't have the kind of money where we can go out and buy anything extravagant," Rufe noted.

As a director, most of Rufe's job is about administrative duties, including personnel issues, fundraising drives, and laying out a long-term vision for the museum. While she thinks that administrative work is her strength, occasionally she gets to serve as a curator.

"Every now and then, I get to play with the objects. That's why I got into the museum field to begin with," she said.

The most recent exhibit that Rufe curated herself is one called "Interweavings" featuring the work of Howard Cook and his wife, Barbara Latham.

"It's some of the most extraordinary work that was ever produced in New Mexico by a New Mexico artist," she said. To illustrate, she stopped in front of two paintings, one of an old Appalachian woman by Latham, and one of two African-American boys by Cook. She pointed out the influence of Cubism in the form, and the way that Cook's work on murals influence the frame's composition, but settled on the emotion of each piece as a defining characteristic.

"You can see that these are working-class people that are struggling, but you can also see the dignity in their faces," she said.

Rufe has only been drawn away from RMAC once since 1987, to become director of the Tucson Museum of Art.

"One of the reasons that lured me was that I knew they had a lot of challenges, and I thought that I could make a difference," she said.

But after three years, she was tired of the frenetic pace of her job in Tucson. The Roswell museum keeps her busy, but the work is less hectic. When her contract in Tucson ended, the directorship position re-opened at RMAC, and she was invited back.

"Getting back here it was slower paced, and it gives you time to think," she said.

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Laurie Rufe, director of the Roswell Museum and Art Center, next to one of her favorite paintings in the museum's collection "Landscape, New Mexico" by Marsden Hartley. (Daily Record/Cid Standifer)

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Rufe returned to Roswell just in time to see some of the projects begun under her previous tenure come to fruition. Among them was the Rogers and Mary Ellen Aston Collection of the American West, a dizzying array of artifacts from the West's past inhabitants, including Native American beadwork, prehistoric pottery, the armor of Spanish conquistadors, and the saddles of white settlers who worked the land. Rufe secured more than \$600,000 for renovating the exhibit before she left for Arizona. In October 2006, shortly after she returned, the collection re-opened to the public.

Rufe has great plans for the future of RMAC, including an expansion of the museum's courtyard.

"I love Roswell," she said. "This is a great museum, and there are more challenges and wonderful opportunities ahead."

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