

The Smithsonian American Art Museum:

A Q&A With Museum Director Stephanie Stebich

WRITTEN BY: LACEY JOHNSON



IN THE FRENETIC hub of downtown Washington, D.C., less than a mile from the White House, where politicians pass by with their briefcases and cups of coffee, and tourists pass by with their curiosities, there reverberates the heartbeat of American art.

Stretching across two city blocks, it stands a dignified playground where the ghosts of American imaginations, past and present, are not buried, but live on without reservation. The craftsmanship of more than 7,000 pioneers are venerated inside - from Italian Renaissance contender Leonardo da Vinci, to abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler to fashion and portrait photographer (and popular culture favorite) Irving Penn. Where visitors can be lit up by a neon map of America, lean into the Wright Brothers' inaugural daringness for flight, relive the Civil Rights Era, and gaze at the nation's first flag with its modest 15 stars and 15 stripes.

Better known as the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), the nation's first collection of American art, it houses emancipated offerings of architecture, film, paintings, photography, sculpture and sketch, including evidence from Hollywood classics to video games, all displayed in unabashed liberty.

And then there is the Renwick Gallery, located in a separate building nine blocks away, mere steps from the White House. A millennial favorite, this is the museum's branch for more contemporary and innovative modes of artistic expression.

I sat down for a conversation with the museum's director, Stephanie Stebich, and we discussed the American identity, complete with its brave culture of innovation, gorgeous diversity and fallacies about success. Most significantly, we discussed the museum's fascinating and reverent cross-section of nearly every era spanning four centuries - the evolution of the American paradigm stretching out floor by floor, turn by turn, story by story.

Lacey Johnson: What does American art have to teach us about living our best lives?

Stephanie Stebich: I think in America we have this notion that people who succeed are always the lucky ones. But the truth is that you have to make your own luck. Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors only the prepared mind." It's not about waiting for these eureka moments. It's about being prepared so that you can create these eureka moments. That is how art, or anything great, is made.

LJ: I have long believed art to be a mirror. Every brain perceives and interprets each mode of artistic expression uniquely, which is also to say that every museum exhibition is a different exhibition for every individual. So if art is resonating with each person uniquely, it is simply mirroring an aspect of themselves back at them. Do you agree with this concept?

SS: Yes, I believe that you see the world from where you sit. And, by that, I mean we all come from a unique set of circumstances - privileges, personal trials, interventions, educational backgrounds and also varying levels of what I called digital literacy. In the 21st century, we live in a hyper-digital world. I think, because of this, museums are ever more popular. People are interested in learning where this visual culture comes from. I think these museum-curated experiences offer a sort of mirror of the world. So, for example, if you go to the Smithsonian American Art Museum's website, we ask you a question: Where will American art take you? The answer is different for everyone; it will take you to places based on your own interests. Museums are places of discovery and conversation.

LJ: Art imitates life and life imitates art. What do you believe art has to teach us about humanity and about ourselves - specifically as Americans?



Photo by Tim Hursley, Courtesy of SAAM



Photo by: Ken Rahaim, Courtesy of SAAM



Director Stephanie Stebich, Courtesy of SAAM



Albert Bierstadt painting, Courtesy of SAAM

SS: At SAAM, we offer a view into what we call the American experience. We have the largest and most inclusive collections of American art. These collections chart the nation's growth from a young republic colonial era to a world power. And we do this through the lens of American creativity.

LJ: You have an incredibly cool job. What is the most fulfilling aspect of it?

SS: It's the best job in the world. What makes it most interesting for me is that I run two museums, actually. I have the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where we have everything from folk art to photography, and it is located in the old Patent Office building. It was the third federal building constructed, between the White House and the Capitol. This is so important to consider because, as a nation, we are an innovative culture.

I also have the Renwick Gallery, which all millennials seem to love. It is located a block from the White House, and was the first building to have been built specifically to house art. Renwick opened its doors in the early 70s, thanks in part to Jackie Kennedy's intervention, who helped us secure the building. There is an interesting and lengthy story to its history, but the time of its opening was the heyday of American Studio Craft. So, in the museum, we have a lot of conversations about crafting, handy making and the Maker's Movement in general.

LJ: Tell me about the Renwick Gallery's upcoming exhibition, *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*.

SS: First of all, if you haven't been to Burning Man, you have to go. It's a 30 year-old annual gathering that originated in California. The whole

gathering was later moved to a very remote spot in the desert called Black Rock City, Nevada. Traveling there is not easy by any means, but worth it. It's where 70,000 people create this pop-up community in one week. It doesn't classify as a festival necessarily, but is really about the art. It encourages radical inclusion and expression, and is sort of a laboratory for urban planning.

People set up camps in this sort of semi-circle, and then the center space is the playa (or beach), where people create these incredible sculptures and pieces. We have asked many of its artists, "What is it that makes Burning Man so special?" because we are bringing it to the nation's capital in a museum setting. Artists generally tell us it's special for three reasons: First, it's a community of artists making things, second, it's art being made on a scale that you normally can't build at - outside with this beautiful horizon line - and, third, it involves some kind of technology.

LJ: So how will you champion such an elaborate and specific experience to the public?

We have a handful of incredible artists who we have commissioned to make pieces. The exhibition will be both inside and outside of the building. One of the wonderful things about Burning Man is that, when you arrive there, physically, they say, "Welcome to Burning Man. Welcome home." And, when you leave, they say, "Goodbye," but in such a way that is welcoming you back into the default world. So when you come to Renwick for the *The Art of Burning Man*, you will arrive and there will be a gigantic paper archway signifying both that welcoming and farewell.

At the same time, we have an exhibition at the SAAM main building that also contains an immersive quality. It's called *Almost Home*, and is by a Korean-American artist named Do Ho Suh. He is a global



Renwick Gallery, Photo by Ron Blunt, Courtesy of SAAM.

Totem of Confessions,
by Michael GarlingtonFuture's Past,
by Kate Raudenbush

Shrumen Lumen, by FoldHaus



Evotrope, by Richard Wilks



Renwick Gallery: Gamefish, courtesy of SAAM

artist who works between Seoul, Korea, London and New York City, but this is the first time he has a major exhibition on the east coast. [For the exhibition] he has recreated the foyers of his three apartments.

LJ: What is the artistic significance of the foyers?

SS: You know how you reach your foyer and know that you are “almost home”? It’s this space of arrival, crossing out of the public realm where you present yourself a certain way, and then back into your home space. He created the experience using this sort of ethereal and translucent material, this textile fabric in brilliant colors. It explores identity, and it’s immersive so you kind of walk through them.

LJ: What is the process of your research in preparation for all of these massively complex exhibitions - both the fun and playful parts as well as the tedious parts that an outsider may not consider?

SS: For one, at SAAM, we have the oldest and largest fellowship program in American art. But, as a museum director, my job is to support artists and curators. We have 14 curatorial seats - from contemporary art to prints, drawings and everything in between. I also think that more and more museums have taken the opportunity to champion artists, which is a beautiful thing. For example, with *Art of Burning Man* and *Do Ho Suh: Almost Home*, we are working closely with the artists to create unique environments. It’s important to give them plenty of room for creativity as well as tools to work with. One of my favorite trustees used to say to me, “Stephanie, if you don’t support artists, there won’t be any.” I’m always looking for areas where I can discover or rediscover artists, then share their talent with as broad of a population as possible.

LJ: So would you say that, while your professional title is Director, what you are really doing is illuminating the personalities and artistic subtleties within the diverse American spirit?

SS: I love the way you say that because, yes, it is absolutely what we are doing. We spend a lot of time thinking about American identity. We think about where it has been and where it is going. We also discover how old some of our definitions for art can become. For example, how do you define photography today? What level of manipulation is still considered a photograph? But it’s the artists who are pushing us, who are changing these definitions. I see it because, more and more, we are forced to label this piece or that piece as “mixed media.” With advancements in media and technology, the lines are blurred with everything from photography to sculpture. I love it when we have to ask ourselves, “What is this?” It is an example of one of the many ways art stretches us as a society.

You can look at the work of Nick Cave, who makes soundsuits using elements he finds at flea markets. Is that a craft? Yes. Is it contemporary and, if so, do we throw that into the Renwick? Do we also feature it at SAAM? Yes and yes again.

LJ: Isn’t it interesting to think about all of the artists who have never been known, perhaps even to themselves? People are often so afraid to make bad art that they don’t make anything at all.

SS: One of my favorite quotes is from the Roman poet Horace. He says, “Begin, be bold and venture to be wise.” That’s what it’s all about. That how you get museums full of art. Somebody began.