Blackfish Gallery

Blackfish Gallery was founded as a cooperative art gallery in Portland in 1979. The decision to create a new gallery came about largely because, at the time, there were not enough galleries to accommodate the number of artists in town. The gallery's history can be traced to 1978, when a group of artists interested in supporting each other professionally envisioned something new—a gallery entirely owned and operated by its artist-members. The founding members rented an empty storefront at 325 N.W. Sixth Street and, with their own labor, skills, and ingenuity, opened the gallery a year later. The gallery is currently located at 420 NW 9th Avenue.

Since its beginnings, Blackfish has represented over 150 significant Oregon and Washington artists. These artists have included, most notably, founding members Judy Cooke, Paul Missal, Barbara Black, Julia Fish, and Stephen Soihl, as well as a host of other well known Portland artists such as Bob Dozono and Michael Knutson.

Each Blackfish project is designed to carry out the three goals that support its mission: to seek out and present outstanding visual art within the context of thought-provoking ideas; to provide a forum and venue for artists creating unique work that may exist beyond retail and commercial boundaries; and to reach for a broader and more diverse audience by continuing to program exhibitions and events with themes having significance for a wide cross section of the community.

Although the primary objective of Blackfish has been to promote, exhibit, and sell the work of its artist-members, the gallery also has had a reputation for exhibiting challenging contemporary work by its own artists and invited guests. Blackfish has hosted a wide variety of events, including monthly exhibitions, talks by visiting artists, panel discussions, site-specific installations, theater performances, literary readings, and exchanges with cooperative galleries from other cities. These exchanges have included Gallery 110 in Seattle, as well as 55 Mercer Gallery in New York City. In addition, Blackfish Gallery collaborated with the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) for its 100-year anniversary by showcasing its artist-members who were PNCA alums. Every July, the gallery hosts its recent graduate exhibition designed to showcase Oregon's emerging talent from schools across the state.

Blackfish Gallery is supported almost entirely through the sale of artwork and the labor, expertise, and monthly dues paid by its artist-members. Blackfish members attend monthly meetings, where management decisions are made, exhibitions are selected and scheduled, applications for membership are reviewed, and talks are given by artists who are to exhibit during the coming month. The number of members at any given time varies but is limited to about thirty in order to provide each the opportunity to exhibit every eighteen to twenty-four months. Successful applicants are accepted on the basis of an evaluation of their work and interviews in which members evaluate their ability to work well with others within the framework of the co-op. This process has been in place for thirty years, and Blackfish has become one of the most viable models for sustainable cooperative galleries in the nation.

Written by Eric Rue

Further Reading:

Blackfish Gallery. http://www.blackfish.com/index.cfm.

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