Curators Brainstorm Big Dreams for—and Identify Gaps in—Utah’s Contemporary Arts

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A believed first-time gathering of Utah contemporary art curators at the 2022 Spring Summit in Green River yields big dreams and ideas for improvement.

Words
Steve Jansen
GREEN RIVER, UT—Eight contemporary art curators gathered around five tables that had been loosely arranged to echo the shape of a monument, where oversized notepads quickly filled with colorfully-marked text such as “shuttle service for the arts” and “more focus/continued focus on social/racial justice.”

Here, in the lower level of the John Wesley Powell River History Museum in Green River, Utah, was likely the first-of-its-kind gathering of some of the state’s most creative minds. As part of the 2022 Spring Summit in Green River, co-hosted by Epicenter and Granary Arts, eight of the state’s contemporary art curators—including curators from the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art in Salt Lake City and the Springville Museum of Art—brainstormed what’s working and what needed to improve in the Utah art ecosystem.

Amy Jorgensen, executive director and chief curator of Granary Arts, a nonprofit contemporary art space in Ephraim, organized and led the “Curators: Peer to Peer” workshop. During introductions, Jorgensen explained the significance of the March 31, 2022 event.
"Anecdotally, I think this may be the first time a group of curators has officially met in the history of the state of Utah," said Jørgensen, who was joined by Bolton Coblurn of the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum in Logan, Emily Larsen of Springville Museum of Art, Nancy Rivera of Utah Arts and Museums, John Sproul of Nox Contemporary in Salt Lake City, Jared Steffensen of UMOCA, and independent curators Kristina Lenzi and Jorge Rojas.

The curators split into two groups, rotated between the tables, and responded to discussion prompts: gaps, big dreams, points of collaboration, and action items. An idea for future collaborations included more connections between artists and institutions, potentially in the form of a shared database. One of the highlighted gaps was the lack of resources for the arts, ranging from funding concerns to a lack of mentorship opportunities, while a big dream was more coverage and critical reviews from national media.
After about forty-five minutes, the curators gathered at the head table—a configuration inspired by Green River’s Monument Hill, a massive concrete block installation that was the site of the summit’s opening ceremony—to go over their vision statements, which included ideas such as:

A thriving, inclusive, and well-funded arts ecosystem at the forefront of the contemporary arts and cultural dialogue.

I envision a creative think-tank that would break away from the old-fashioned way of thinking about limited ideas. Instead, we can promote abundance-thinking versus scarcity-thinking.

The Utah arts scene fosters abundance, connection, and relevance through a thriving, supportive network of artists, institutions, and benefactors. Think big and create connection across the state and beyond.

I envision a community of contemporary curators that is supportive of each other and of our collective work as it relates to our broader arts and culture ecosystem. We envision learning from each other, challenging each other, inspiring each other, and supporting each other as we nurture a new era of curators that will help determine and contribute to the future of our state’s contemporary art scene.
The closed workshop was part of the three-day 2022 Spring Summit, an experiential conference of approximately seventy invited participants—including designers, architects, artists, curators, cultural producers, and community organizers—who traveled from all over the region to gather in the small town of Green River, located off of Interstate 70 approximately fifty miles northwest of Moab.

The summit featured artist and curator presentations, workshops, a community service project, and keynote presentations by Efi Tsoutsoumazakis, assistant professor and founding faculty in the Multi-Disciplinary Design program at the University of Utah; Matthew Smith and Joseph Kunkel (Northern Cheyenne) of MASS Design Group's Santa Fe, New Mexico office, a social justice and human dignity-focused architecture firm; and artist Chip Thomas (AKA Jetsonorama), who installed new work during the shindig at Tacos La Pasadita.
The 2022 Spring Summit, held March 30 through April 1, was sponsored by Utah Arts and Museums and the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation and co-hosted by Green River’s Epicenter, a rural investment and cultural exploration nonprofit.
Chris Thomas, an honorarary citizen who installed new work at Texas Tech University, gives a keynote inside the Owens-Brum High School auditorium on April 1, 2022. (Photo: Steve Darnell)
Debbie Long: Light Ships

MARCH 25 - OCTOBER 9, 2022

Nancy Rowe, a Salt Lake City-based artist and curator for Utah Arts and Museums, presented during the 2022 Spring Round in Green River, Utah on April 1, 2022. Photo: Kandis Ketcham. Courtesy: Grandma Art.
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Steve Jansen is the news editor at Southwest Contemporary. An Albuquerque-based investigative news reporter and arts writer, he has won and been nominated for various state, regional, and national awards. In 2013, his investigation into two crumbling Houston dams attained first place for Best Print News/Feature Story in the Texas statewide Lone Star Awards. He’s a former staff writer for Phoenix New Times and Houston Press.