

Debrief

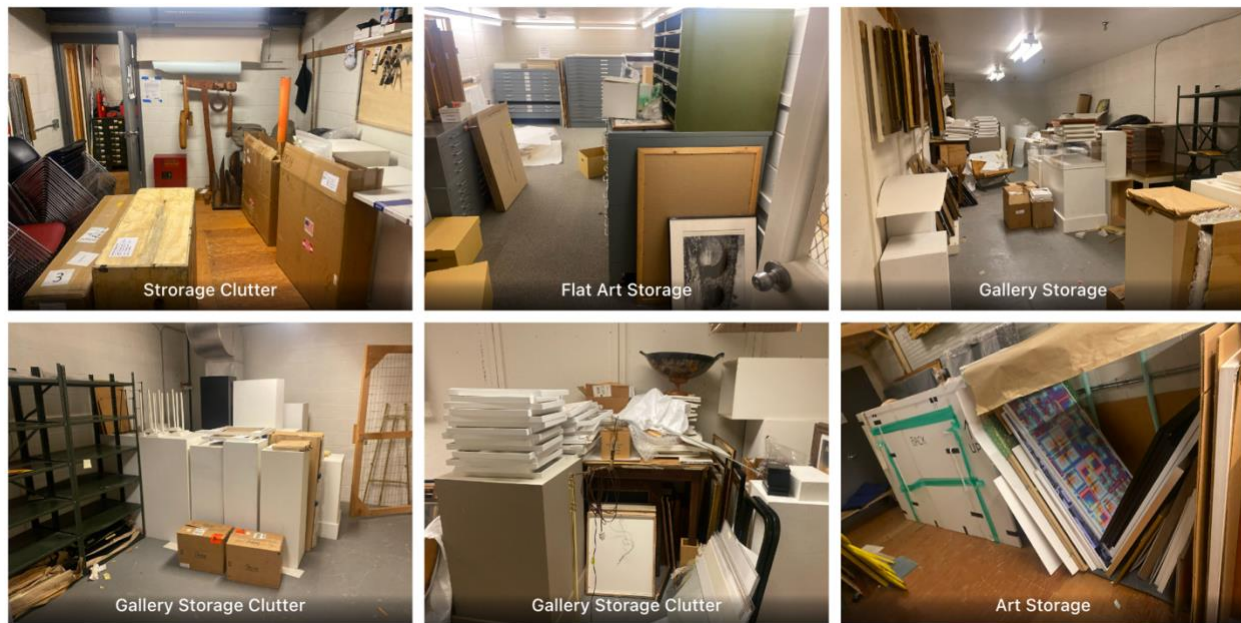
Over the past nine weeks I have been fortunate enough to intern at the Martin Art Gallery (MAG) as an Exhibitions & Collections Manager. The Martin Art Gallery is located in Allentown, Pennsylvania and is run by gallery Director, Jessica Ambler. Although the duration of the internship was brief, I was able to help the Martin Art Gallery make several updates to their facilities, documents, and procedures. I also was fortunate enough to meet several artists and art managers, attend art events, and learn what it's like to direct a gallery. Jessica took time to go through the galleries systems, documents, budget, and even explained her approach to planning exhibitions for several gallery spaces and art events. Then allowed me to use this knowledge to help the gallery in day-to-day tasks and long-term planning. The following debrief covers these and other accomplishments and experiences throughout the internship.

As the Exhibitions & Collections Manager my main priorities lied in helping artists, packing, and unpacking their artwork, set up, dismantle, and transport artwork as needed. A higher priority however was managing the collection and storage/ workspace which was lacking in minimal standards needed to protect art and was causing more damage than it was preventing. Mass disorganization was hindering the ability to view and properly document the full gallery collection. The MAG gallery has a vast collection of more than 4,000 artworks consisting of surprising artists such as Judy Chicago, Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, and more. Unfortunately, due to past mismanagement much of this collection was poorly stored, many artworks unaccounted for, in need of repair, and most are still not properly documented or appraised. Because of this disarray the gallery could not do many things including providing an updated assessment of the gallery's facilities. The value of the full collection is unknown. The insurance coverage is inadequate. To top it off, all of the gallery's documents of the collections, past exhibitions, past budgets were missing and jumbled in a mass of documents boxes. This all became the biggest priority of the internship because the gallery could not apply to many grants, properly budget for the best interest of the collection, and had a hard time safely bringing in and sending out artworks for exhibitions.

In order to properly assist the gallery, a big hurdle was learning enough about the gallery and its past to figure out how to best help. This took several meetings with the director, who has only started in the position half a year before. To summarize, the gallery has a small budget of about \$40K a year. The gallery has 4 main art showing spaces to display exhibitions at any given time. Usually consisting of artwork from the vast collection or a visiting artist. The gallery is too low budget to typically afford to lend or borrow works, pay for shipping, and often forgoes previously used marketing tactics due to lack of funds. It is apparent that past directors used funds on things like marketing and exhibitions but not on collections management or storage. The oversight from the university that owns the gallery is lacking and disinterested in its surprisingly good collection located in failing facilities. Making it very hard to enact changes, receive proper funding, or even do things in a timely manner. Because of this Jessica is the sole employee and manager of the gallery, working alone with an occasional intern or inadequately trained student workers. She had begun the arduous process of tackling the collection and gallery

documents. Slowly getting the galleries history together, transferring collections files to a new more appropriate system, and trying to sort through the packed storage areas. When I arrived, she had already managed to make a 3-year exhibition plan, updated many of the documents needed to run the gallery, and was just realizing the alarming state of the gallery's facilities and needs.

Facility Condition Upon Arrival:



During the internship when I was not assisting with handling artwork, visiting with an artist, or attending an event, I spent a lot of time organizing and evaluating the galleries facilities and needs. The above photos showcase the disarray of the gallery's storage upon starting the internship. This took many weeks of moving out junk, dealing with artwork as it was found including several unframes Andy Warhol's in a stack of random art works. Then planning how to organize the space based on needs, availability, and realistic use of funding. After sketching diagrams, finding more appropriate art storage methods, and consistently reassessing the space the galleries facilities are now over a year ahead of what Jessica had anticipated completing. I personally built and upgraded existing art storage. The flat art was all moves to one space and acid free paper was inserted to protect works that had already begun to yellow due to prolonged neglect. Large artworks and sculptures were moved and installed on campus to make room. Lastly, the workspace and gallery storage for framing, packing materials, and pedestal storage was organized, and made into a usable space. All of these spaces are currently waiting for further updates to be professionally installed to increase the professionalism and meet standards that should be applied to such an important art collection. The following are the same gallery facilities after the updates completed during the internship.



Art Storage



Gallery Storage



Flat Storage



Organizing Frames



Work Space



Usable Space

Throughout the internship, as I learned more about the gallery the more I realized that many goals I had set as a guide for the internship were hindered by the lack of proper documentation of the collection and gallery assets. My focus of goals in terms of gallery documents during the internship slowly focused on the following: The Martin Art Gallery Manual which hadn't been updated since 2007. A collection of the full list of issues, needs, and updates the gallery requires to meet museum and collections standards as set by the American Alliance of Museums. Creating a 5-year plan for the gallery. After much research, drafting, and meeting with the director, we decided to combine these documents into the new and updated Manual. Much of which was updated to reflect the galleries current staffing, goals, and collection needs. Many of the updates such as the accessioning and deaccessioning procedures which will have to be approved before being implemented. To summarize these procedural changes, streamline the process and grant more power of decision to the director, while leaving the university power to veto collection choices upon review. This removes several approval positions, and boards, in the school in order to make any action. The skeleton of an Emergency Response Plan was also added into the manual. This is due to the need to walk through the facilities and plan with several departments of the university which we could not get going in a timely manner. Another major change to the manual was updating the galleries collection plan which I wrote out after several discussions with Jessica Ambler. The new collection plan is as follows:

“The Martin Art Gallery does not currently have an acquisition budget at this time due to lack of funding and the urgent need for investment in the existing collection and facilities. All new additions to the collections currently are through approved donations to the gallery. In order to build and strengthen what is already a vast and impressive collection, the gallery is currently seeking to acquire works by underrepresented artists (BIOPIC, LGBTQ+, women) through these donations or with aid of additional funding. This aligns with Muhlenberg's commitment to support the arts and is relevant to the college's mission to support DEIB initiatives. All additions to the collection should support the college's history as well as allow for use of the collection that enhances the curricula not only for studio and art history instruction but also in the humanities and sciences. All acquisitions to, and de-accessions from, the collection should be consistent with this statement of purpose and meet all other recognized professional and ethical standards as provided by the American Alliance of Museums.”

Although I did not have enough time to plan and schedule a full exhibition as an exhibitions manager, I was able to get a high-profile artist to agree to and schedule an hour-long artist talk with a Q&A for the gallery. After Jessica explained her goals to host events that meet the same standards as the above collection plan, she asked me to suggest and plan an event. My choice of artist to give an artist talk for MAG was Trenton Doyle Hancock. An African American mixed media artist from Houston, TX whose artwork is in museums and high-profile collections across the US and internationally. I had in fact purchased some collectable artwork cards from the artists website previously. Because I experienced a delay in receiving these cards I put an inquiry in through the website and received a personal email from the artist letting me know he was making sure the cards were on their way. He signed two and even sent extras which I had promptly emailed him back and thanked him for, corresponding back and forth a few times. I decided to use this built repour to reach out directly to the artist offering him a low budget offer for the event considering his status, asking him if he was interested in giving a virtual artist talk

at the gallery. Surprisingly, he eagerly agreed. I was able to plan out the event and have contracts signed. Trenton will be giving an hour-long artist talk followed by a Q & A at the Martin Art Gallery on September 5th, 2024, at 5pm (EST). For me this is one of the most exciting accomplishments which I was certainly expecting to be a flop. Jessica has this noted as a very big event for the gallery which she plans to leverage it to draw more attention and support from around Allentown.

From this internship and Jessica's taking a personal interest in showing me her job as Director, I feel much more confident and practiced in applying the skills and knowledge I've been gathering throughout this master's program. It was oddly ideal to have stumbled onto the opportunity to be in this internship because of the amount of help the gallery really needed and still needs. I was able to apply museum management and collections standards along with expectations of art and history accessibility for museums because the goals are so ideally similar for collections in universities. Allowing me to make recommendations and a consultation of sorts to resolve or at least make major head way on many issues. Which Jessica took seriously and with interest, allowing me to make changes to the physical spaces, outdated documents, and even make investment suggestions on what updates would be most beneficial to the gallery. Some of which even resides in the 5-year plan in the galleries updated manual. I feel I could have accomplished much more under a longer internship period but am extremely pleased with the progress and accomplishments made during the 9 weeks at MAG.

In the end I was able to plan a big event for the gallery, sorted through and organized the galleries documents as well as physical facilities, compiled a list of needs for the gallery, worked with artists and their artwork to ensure preschedule exhibitions went as planned, and most importantly updated the MAG manual to reflect its current goals, needs, and current Director. This internship I personally feel adds a great deal of credibility to my CV coupled with my soon to be completed degree. Jessica, who has also had a plethora of visual arts related jobs showed me several companies that have well paying positions managing artists and artworks remotely. She, herself working as the gallery director and as a remote artist manager was inspiring when she explained how she made it work. Many of these types of positions I was very unaware of and previously would have felt unqualified for. In terms of personal growth my confidants and job parameters have changed for the better. Although I still don't know where I may be one year to the next due to my wife's sculpture professor job, I know I will be able to sustain and grow my own career regardless of my location. In retrospect that's exactly what I've already been doing throughout the course of pursuing my Masters. I feel confident I will continue to find new job opportunities and build off my experiences as I graduate and pursue my career going forward.

I'd like to end this debrief paper with a letter reviewing the internship sent to me via email from Jessica Ambler highlighting her perspective on its success and major accomplishments. Thanks to her help and willingness to make time for me this was an extremely informative internship that both parties feel was a great success.

"I was fortunate enough to be able to supervise Thomas Petty this semester for an internship at the Martin Art Gallery where I am the Director. Thomas was incredibly organized, motivated, and eager to learn about my role as a gallery director. Given Mr. Petty's interest in arts management, I decided to approach the internship with a wide variety of goals, both long term

and short term. At the beginning of the internship, I gave Thomas an overview of the gallery's operations and major projects that were underway.

One such project was the reorganization of gallery storage to utilize the space more efficiently and to better protect the art. Thomas drew up diagrams and listed the steps necessary to meet this goal. Once I approved his plan he made short work of putting the changes into effect. I was impressed not only with how quickly he implemented the changes but also with how thorough he was in doing so. A second major project that I worked with Thomas on was editing and updating the gallery's operations manual which was woefully out of date. He was able to suggest changes based on current best practices for storage, handling, and display of artworks as well as adapting the manual to reflect the gallery's smaller current staff. I also asked Thomas to draft a new five-year plan for the gallery which has never been done before. We discussed a range of goals such as the complete cataloging of the collection and grant opportunities to fund improvements and maintenance of the facilities and art. I believe this exercise was helpful for Mr. Petty to gain a better understanding of how to assess an institution's function and needs while considering viable options for improvement.

The short-term projects that I worked with Thomas on were related to the gallery's exhibition and programming schedule. I strive to maintain an exhibition calendar that projects at least two to three years in advance. Thomas and I discussed the various elements that must be taken into account to identify appropriate exhibitions such as caliber of artist, cost to mount the show, appropriate space in which to hold the exhibition, as well as other related matters such as marketing. Given the short span of Mr. Petty's internship, he did not have time to plan an entire exhibition, however, I did ask him to organize a program to be held in the fall at the gallery. I asked that the program be led by an artist, and ideally an artist from an underrepresented community (BIOPIC, LGBTQ+, women) who could bring a new and interesting perspective to our campus. Thomas identified an appropriate artist and handled the outreach by writing directly to the artist and proposing a virtual lecture with an honorarium. Trenton Doyle Hancock, the artist Thomas chose, is a well-known, established artist with major gallery representation and I am incredibly grateful that he has agreed to give the talk. Thomas not only suggested an excellent artist, but he also handled the artist outreach and communication professionally and promptly, a nuanced skill that is necessary to run a successful institution.

Frankly, if I were able to hire Mr. Petty to assist me in the gallery's operation and management, I would do so immediately. He has great ideas and brings a welcome perspective to the conversations we have about the future of the gallery. He is intelligent, trustworthy, dedicated, and a wonderful colleague, all of which will serve him well as he sets out on a career path in arts management."