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NEW VOICES, NEW VISIONS
AT TUFTS GALLERIES, SHE'S BRINGING OUT THE GLEAM IN A
HIDDEN GEM

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Amy Ingrid Schlegel stepped into an artistic void when she was hired as director of the galleries and collections at Tufts University in January. The four university galleries had been run by an interim director for more than a year. Before that, the woman at the helm, anthropologist Susan Masuoka, had taken the word "art" out of the galleries' title and mounted exhibitions that were ethnographic and historical.

Schlegel, who has a PhD in art history from Columbia University, immediately convened a steering committee, which voted unanimously to return art to the four venues in the Aidekman Arts Center, now known as Tufts University Art Galleries.

"There are already so many wonderful museums in the greater Boston metropolitan area," Schlegel, 39, says. "We want to be a player. We're 4 miles from downtown Boston. We're closer than other venues that are thriving."

Although she still had to work with Masuoka's roster of exhibitions, some of which are planned years out, Schlegel spotted a hole in the schedule over the summer and mounted the first Tufts Annual Juried Exhibition, which reached out to local artists in Somerville and Medford. She has put up a plasma screen in the

arts center that continuously shows art videos. She noticed that sculptures, such as one by Frank Stella, were being ignored, or even worse, leaned on, and she relocated them.

Then, this fall, she made her mark on the exhibition lineup. "I had an opportunity to jettison something from the schedule that was not up to the quality I wanted to see here," Schlegel says. She learned about a traveling show that would meet that standard: "The Amazing and the Immutable," organized by the University of South Florida, which powerfully pairs contemporary art photography with historical art photography.

"It's world class material, and curatorially radical, with historical and contemporary juxtapositions," Schlegel says.

Overseeing several galleries in an academic setting can be daunting. Katherine French knows firsthand the challenges Schlegel faces. She took over the direction of the galleries at Montserrat College of Art 2 1/2 years ago; before that she got two galleries at Boston University up and running.

"It's like walking into a house that has already been built," French says. "You have to figure out how to make it your own."

Schlegel did just that in her previous position, as curator at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, where she beefed up the exhibitions program and garnered some press attention. At Tufts, her agenda is similar.

"We have to raise our profile both on campus and off," Schlegel says. "Students don't need to be afraid of walking in the door, as many of them are. We need to be a resource for our host community. [When I got here] there was no marketing, and maybe one event during the run of [a] show."

Schlegel has remedied that. She's an avid networker - with the local arts community, and with Tufts alumni. And she's introduced regular gallery talks, including a Wednesday lunch series. "Nobody has this much programming!" she says.

She also wants to reframe the annual exhibitions of degree candidates in the program in which Tufts partners with School of the Museum of Fine Arts. "Is it just a degree requirement, or can it be conceived as a professional development tool?" she asks. "Maybe the thesis exhibitions can function as a debut."

Looking ahead, Schlegel plans to create exhibitions with work by international artists.

"I especially want to work with artists who are transnational, which is a common phenomenon," she says. "Wherever you are, you find artists who have emigrated and are working in a completely different context from that in which they were raised or trained."

Exhibitions she'd like to mount include work by Iranian post-revolutionary artists, a thematic retrospective of artist Nancy Spero, and a survey of women pop artists from 1958 to 1968. Talking about any one of them, Schlegel lights up.

"We're trying to locate works that we've seen in reproduction, but we don't know where they are," she says of the pop show. "It's like detective work. Who were the key pop artists? The only one that anyone can name is Marisol [Escobar]. We've found 20 we're examining, and really considering how pop could be defined."

Shows like that won't appear at the Tufts University Art Galleries for at least a year and a half; they must be funded before they can be put together. In the short term, Schlegel feels she has her work cut out for her.

"We have a beautiful space that has been perceived as a hidden gem," she says, looking around the main gallery that now houses "The Amazing and the Immutable." "Our challenges are not that great."

Caption:

Amy Ingrid Schlegel took over as director of the galleries and collections at Tufts University in January and started making changes immediately. "We want to be a player," she says. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MICHELE MCDONALDPHOTO

Memo:

MIXED MEDIA

Amy Ingrid Schlegel

Age: 39

Hometown: Bethlehem, Pa.

Most memorable art experience: Seeing Jonathan Borofsky's 1985 midcareer survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art
Movie she recommends: Zhang Yimou's "Hero"

In her CD player: Trio Fantasia, "Como se Lleva un Lunar"

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