

"WBGO Journal"

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The following is a transcript of an interview with Queens Museum of Art (QMA) director Tom Finkelpearl, occasioned during the run of "The Gift" exhibition, on view at the QMA from November 20, 2005- February 26, 2006; Nineteen of Tamar's works were prominently featured in this show, which included work by artists Ellen Harvey, Richard Avedon, Jenny Holzer and Julian LaVerdiere.

Doug Doyle:

One of the hidden jewels of the New York City cultural scene is the Queens Museum of Art, located in Flushing Meadows Park in the old New York City Pavilion from both the 1939 and 1964 Worlds Fairs. It's best known for the panorama of New York City. As WBGO's Terry Sheridan reports, that's, hopefully, about to change.

Terry Sheridan:

Almost everyone has passed the Queens Museum of Art inside Flushing Meadows Park alongside the Grand Central Parkway as they head toward Shea Stadium or the Tennis Center.

Tom Finkelpearl:

The Queens Museum of Art is in a building that was built for the '39 Worlds Fair. It was the home for the United Nations General Assembly for four years in the 40s. It was part of the '64 World's Fair and it became a museum in 1972.

Sheridan:

Museum director Tom Finkelpearl.

Finkelpearl:

We have this incredible history of the place. The partition of Palestine happened in our building. UNICEF was born here. But we have to figure out what to do that's different from everybody else in the present.

Sheridan:

And that's the challenge.

Finkelpearl:

So the main thing we've been trying to figure out is... what can we do *better* than the Museum of Modern Art? What can we do *better* than the Met? Not how can we compete with them.

SFX (tour guide)

Sheridan:

Almost every school kid in New York City, at one time or another, has visited the panorama of New York City, a scale model of the five boroughs. David Strauss, the museum's director of public relations, walks me through the model – the first time I've seen it in over 35 years.

David Strauss:

It's an unbelievable thing, from a p.r. standpoint. You talk about the numbers involved: a 9,335 square-foot architectural model, with each of the 895,000 buildings that existed in New York City in 1992, when the panorama was last updated. And those are just numbers. They don't mean anything. Here we are – we're standing above this model and you see the expanse of New York. Most people – most tourists especially – come to New York and they think Manhattan. They don't see the five boroughs, and they don't understand the way everything works. I mean, from up here you look over at Kennedy Airport and you'll see that it's roughly a third the size of Manhattan.

Sheridan:

The panorama was used extensively over the past few years in New York City's bid for the 2012 Olympics. The site selection committee could see in 3D how the plan would work.

Strauss:

Robert Moses intended this to be used as a planning tool, among other things. Urban planners could come here and figure out the mechanics of the city.

Sheridan:

Ahh. There's 216th Street and 92nd Avenue.

Strauss:

If nothing else, it's for people to come and find their home and say, wow, that's where I live, that's where my aunt lives. So, it's a fantastic model.

Sheridan:

And that's the hook – get the kids and their parents in to see the panorama and then get them to experience the rest of the museum.

Strauss:

There's a certain funkiness, and that's a word that people often use – a funky institution. We like to show our work here, we love to bring classes here. I love coming here on weekends. There's always something fresh that you might not see somewhere else.

Sheridan:

A walk through the museum highlights that.

Strauss:

One of the things we always try to do here is engage the community, not only in coming to the exhibitions, but to understand how exhibitions come to be. And as part of a new partnership – something we're very proud of – between the museum and the Queens Public Library System, we had a workshop on a Saturday morning and afternoon, where we had members of an English-as-a-Second Language Program come in. And our curators worked with these students to help them understand what goes into making a show. So we had actual works from our collection, which we put out so people could work with our staff and understand what works should go next to each other and why.

Sheridan:

The museum is able to show unusual works because of the way the space was constructed for the World's Fair. It's both a challenge, like you said, but it's also got to be liberating to be in a building that's not built as a museum.

Strauss:

Absolutely. And that's something that, as we look at our new expansion, how is that going to play into it. What other museums have gigantic triangular rooms with 60-foot ceilings and stuff like that? And our curatorial staff has really learned how to maximize that and take advantage of an unorthodox room and use it to bring out the work of art that's on view. That makes the experience at the Queens Museum of Art unlike other museums.

Sheridan:

Right now there is an ice skating rink inside the building. The Parks Department is building a new one elsewhere in the park, so the museum will expand into that space. Director Tom Finkelpearl is excited. This will double the space.

Finkelpearl:

I think that the future of the museum is going to be quite a bit different than the present. It'll be a much larger space. We're working with the Queens Public Library to open a library branch in the museum. I think that'll be the first art museum in America to have a library branch in it. And the Queens Public Library is fantastically successful at marketing to and serving the communities of Queens, and we're honored to be partnering with them.

Sheridan:

Finkelpearl says the museum has to grow and change with the population of Queens.

Finkelpearl:

In Queens, there's 140 languages spoken. You just look at our own staff, who speak 8 or 10 languages. It's really an incredible place if you look at the food, the local papers and every day there's something about Queens in the paper. So it's an exciting place to be. And we're looking not at the disadvantages of our location, but we're looking at the advantages. We have a lot of things that other people don't have – the history of the place and the cultural diversity of Queens.

Sheridan:

For the WBGO Journal, I'm Terry Sheridan in Queens.