

The Seattle Times

The year of Martha Rosler: Artist examines homelessness and disparity, wins \$100K from Seattle foundation

By Tricia Romano

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Martha Rosler's "Housing Is a Human Right," Times Square Spectacolor animation detail, 1989. (Courtesy the artist and the New Foundation Seattle)

In a yearlong group of exhibits that will stretch across Seattle, internationally known multimedia artist Martha Rosler takes on big issues.

When Shari D. Behnke and Yoko Ott decided to create a prize for the New Foundation Seattle, they decided to go big. Really big. One hundred thousand dollars big.

"Well, we wanted an amount that would say something," said Behnke, in a room at the foundation's small, chic Pioneer Square gallery.

Not only did Behnke, the foundation's founder, and Ott, its founding director, want to give enough money to raise eyebrows in the art world, they also wanted their first recipient to make a big splash.

The first in the series of three exhibitions, "Home Front," is on view 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, The New Foundation Seattle, 312 Second Ave. S.; free (206-512-7247 or thenewest.org)

The first recipient of the award — to be given biennially to an influential U.S.-based woman artist — is a pretty big deal: Brooklyn-based Martha Rosler, whose thought-provoking work touches on everything from “women’s work,” war and materialism, to bourgeoisie foodie culture. She’s had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and her work has been shown at the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Tate and the Victoria & Albert in London.

“Whenever I’ve come across it, I’ve just gone, ‘Wow. Who is this woman? She is amazing,’” Behnke said. “I’ve wanted to always know more, and spend more time with her work, and find out who she is, and what she’s thinking, and why she’s doing these things.”

Rosler’s work also deals prominently with issues of feminism, making her an apt choice for the prize.

“Clearly, women are underrecognized in the art world,” Behnke explained. “We need to put our money where our mouth is. And, since this organization at this point is basically women. Women work here. Women fund it ... I think we should recognize women.”

The funds are no-strings-attached. And while no new work is going to be shown, it’ll be all-Rosler for a full year. The award comes with a year of integrated programming around the artist and the project, “Housing is a Human Right.” Public talks related to Rosler’s art will be held at the Seattle Public Library and the School of Art, Art History, and Design at the University of Washington incorporating Rosler’s work into its curriculum.

The first part of the project is the exhibit “If You Lived Here Still ...” which opens Thursday, Jan. 28.

Originally shown at the Dia Art Foundation in New York City in 1989, the exhibit has traveled to different cities around the world since 2006, including Barcelona and Liverpool. Through different mediums, the exhibition explores gentrification, displacement, homelessness and issues surrounding planned and unplanned development. Acting like a curator, Rosler combined works by artists, writers, filmmakers, even housing activists who had built huts, as well as research materials. Town-hall meetings were also a big component.

“She really exemplified the attitudes that we have for the Foundation,” said Ott of Rosler and her work. “Like thinking about new ways of philanthropy, ways to engage a community, ways to think about supporting artists.”

Indeed, Rosler’s work dealing with gentrification couldn’t come at a more apt time for Seattle. In the middle of a massive building boom fueled by the tech industry, neighborhoods like Ballard and Capitol Hill are being rebuilt overnight.

“Beautiful, wonderful, Capitol Hill,” Rosler said, “from everything that I’ve read, is quote unquote, ‘It’s gone.’ ”

And the New Foundation's location in Pioneer Square, where the homeless rub shoulders with the upper crust residents living in gleaming new apartment buildings, provides a perfect setting for the discussion.

"The basic issue that I had back then was: Why do we have homeless people?" Rosler said. "Why are there so many all of a sudden? And to build from that question, which was how I entered these issues. What are the housing policies that would create this?"

The show is not Rosler's only connection to Seattle; in the early '90s, she studied the city for her "Seattle: Hidden Histories," a series of short public service announcement videos, featuring members of area Native American tribes.

Then, as now, she recalled, "In Pioneer Square, it was 'Oh, it's the drunken Indians. I remember that very clearly,'" she said. "To cordon it off from your mind and to say, in effect, 'It's their fault. I'm not responsible.'"

But she said, it's not enough to have a realization.

"It's like with feminism, you have to discover why this deserves your attention and your action and your energy," she said. "That is the aim of my work about housing and homelessness, and urban planning. Not just as information but also as suggested routes to action," she said, pointing to the town hall components.

Though this week is the opening at the New Foundation Seattle's Year of Rosler for Seattle actually began in mid-December, when "Below the Surface" was mounted at the Seattle Art Museum, where it will be until July.

There, she's got a room dedicated to some of the works that garnered her attention in the art world, in particular, "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home," which explored the hypocrisy of American gluttony, materialism and "Stepford Wife perfection" by using collages that contrasted the images of war-torn Vietnam (and later revisited with the Iraq war) with gleaming American living rooms and kitchens.

If it all makes you feel uncomfortable, that's the point.

"That's agitational work," Rosler said. "That was intended to get people to think and to act," she said, noting that nowhere is there a blatant banner reading "Stop the war!"

Agitational, but not, as they say now, triggering, as it is never bloody, but provocative, as is Rosler's work about fashion and cooking, which is clever and funny, but also acerbic. Her seminal 1975 video piece, "Semiotics of the Kitchen," shows Rosler naming kitchen tools and wielding them like weapons.

"I mean, you talk about her humor, but there's just so much rage in it," said Leslie Camhi, who writes about art and culture for Vogue and The New York Times.

“It was like what Kafka says — literature should be the ax that breaks the frozen sea within you. It was like that,” she said of her first exposure to Rosler’s work. “Just sort of cutting through, such an opening up of the world I had been formed in.”

Another piece at SAM, a video called “A Budding Gourmet,” features Rosler reading the text of a cookbook extolling “exotic” spices, her delivery containing more than a whiff of sarcasm and eye-rolling.

“It was so obvious that this was a way of telling women that they had to become experts at both producing and consuming,” Rosler said. “The idea of being a person of refinement and taste, which used to be very important to middle-class people, which is who we are, has been replaced by the idea of good taste, literally, taste, as in things you put in your mouth,” she said.

“You used to be known by going to plays or reading novels of a certain character, having avant-garde proclivities. Now, it’s just where do you like to eat, can you appreciate a good whatever,” she said.

From housing to feminism to war, no matter the subject, Rosler is “absolutely consistent,” Behnke said. “That’s the thing about Martha, is that she’s able to look at society and look at the way we’re living and call it out, and just be so right. And she just has that lens that helps us interpret what’s going on.”