



BUILDING A PORTAL
TO THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Cathy Sununu and the Portsmouth Museum of Art



Cathy Sununu is a woman on a mission. As director of the burgeoning Portsmouth Museum of Art (PMA) in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Sununu begins each day with one goal in mind: to develop the museum into a valued community resource with a global reach. Yet as the kerfuffle over the museum's recent exhibition *Street a.k.a. Museum* demonstrates, the mission is not without its challenges. While many applaud the museum's efforts to expose the community to new art forms, some assert that the artwork that blossomed on the exteriors of buildings around town disrupts the quaint charm of their seaside community.

In Sununu's eyes, the debate merely underscores the fact that the museum—temporarily housed in a mixed-use waterfront building with premium office space and penthouse condominiums in downtown Portsmouth—is doing its job. “Art is subjective,” she observes. “With every show we do, we hope that people will come in and see things that they like and dislike. We're trying to push the boundaries a bit and prompt people to question preconceived notions. Our goal is to make people think.”

A slightly built dynamo with a sense of adventure and a penchant for great shoes, Sununu has dedicated untold hours to the museum over the course of her 17-month tenure as director, all of them unpaid. A New Hampshire native and member of a well-known political family, she is no stranger to public service or the arts. Her father, John H. Sununu, is a former three-term state governor, and her brother, John E. Sununu, is

Above from left to right: Edwin Ushiro, *Late for Reconciliation* | Herakut, *Mural at 150 State Street, Portsmouth* (photo credit Philip Case Cohen) | Andreas von Chrzanowski a.k.a. Case, *By the One I Love* (from the *Daily Routine Series*) | *Portrait of Cathy Sununu* by Karrah Kwasnik.

WRITTEN BY LORI FERGUSON

COASTAL HOME

and

TASTE

of the seacoast™

are now available as downloadable apps for the iPad and iPhone from the iTunes store.



Scan with your Smartphone

Go to link on coastalhg.com,
tasteoftheseacoast.com, or
apple.com/itunes to download.

the former United States Senator from New Hampshire. Sununu, together with her parents John and Nancy, is a generous supporter of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters, and over the course of the past 20 years, she has served in a variety of arts organizations and boards, including a three-year stint as head of Manchester's now-defunct arts council.

After taking a hiatus from the arts a few years ago, Sununu moved to the Seacoast and decided that she wanted to plug back in. "I joined the Prescott Park board of directors and then heard about the new contemporary art museum," Sununu says. "I love small businesses and start-ups, so the organization immediately caught my eye." Sununu believed that the time was right to establish this type of institution in Portsmouth, and she wanted to be a part of it. "We had lots of visual arts on the Seacoast, but there wasn't any anchor," she notes. When the museum's original director departed suddenly, the nascent organization was left with all volunteers and a leadership void. "I really believed in the museum's mission, and we needed someone to pick up the baton. I realized that if you want something done, you sometimes have to do it yourself," Sununu says.

Sununu has never looked back. Today, she is more enthusiastic than ever about the museum's prospects, and she's taking multitasking to new heights to ensure that she and her board realize their goals. Sununu is a tireless promoter of the institution. Her duties encompass everything from strategic planning to fundraising and curatorial tasks, together with a healthy dose of marketing and public relations work. A quick review of the museum's press over the past year demonstrates that the efforts of Sununu, her volunteers, and her board are bearing fruit. "We've tried to create a concept for the institution that's sustainable in this area at a reasonable cost," Sununu asserts. It seems to be working. In her estimation, community reception for every art show they have mounted has been overwhelmingly positive, though not without controversy.

"Our aim is to broaden people's perspectives and cultivate a local audience that's more adventuresome in their artistic tastes," Sununu notes. This is a win-win for the community, she explains, because visitors not only support the museum, but also the city's creative economy, since after their museum visits, they often go on to explore downtown boutiques, galleries, restaurants, and the like. The museum's exhibitions also benefit local artists, who—invigorated by the works they encounter during the museum's rotating exhibitions—are more likely to stretch in their own creative endeavors.

When the museum first opened its doors, Sununu and other board members ventured into the community, polling gallery owners and directors of other arts organizations as to what was working and what was not in the local arts scene. For starters, several wonderful museums already existed within driving distance of Portsmouth, including Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Maine's Portland Museum of Art, and Manchester's Currier Museum of Art. "We knew that we needed to carve out a particular niche for ourselves, and we realized that no one was showing twenty-first-century emerging art from around the

world,” she observes. “Local people we spoke to showed an interest in a more diverse arts scene, so we felt like we’d found our calling,” Sununu says. “Part of what we can do as a museum is to serve as a portal for connecting local and regional artists as well as the public to the international arts scene,” she says. “We want to be both educational and evocative.”

The museum’s birth as a grassroots entity has been both a blessing and a curse in realizing this goal. Because the Portsmouth Museum of Art was not launched on the back of a large bequest of artwork or an endowment, the staff has had to struggle for every dollar since the day it opened its doors. Yet this hardscrabble start has also afforded Sununu and her staff tremendous freedom in formulating the exhibitions they mount. “We’re trying to be about the present and the future rather than the past,” says Sununu, who operates the museum on the *kunsthalle* model, a German concept in which a facility mounts a series of temporary exhibitions.

Driven by a desire to focus on new, often unproven artists, and unburdened by the constraints of a permanent collection, the museum has chalked up a series of provocative exhibits. Its first show, *Sacred and Profane*, explored concepts of the sacrilegious and the sacrosanct. *ilmage* dove into a twenty-first-century re-examination of the portrait tradition. *Street a.k.a. Museum*, the museum’s most recent exhibit, tossed off the confines of the museum’s physical structure and launched an exploration into the evolution of street art by placing the art in the streets of downtown Portsmouth.

Sununu and her staff show no signs of letting up. The next exhibition, *Tibetan Contemporaries*, explores the ways in which contemporary Tibetan artists interpret the multitude of overlapping cultures in their lives. Each artist featured follows a personal path to creating art that focuses on Tibetan religious, visual, and cultural themes. The exhibition’s multi-cultural, multi-faceted artwork also serves as a snapshot of the contemporary Tibetan artists community, in which members interact through the Internet, artist associations, galleries, groups, and exhibitions all over the world. Finally, the exhibition includes artwork from artists of other nationalities, who use Tibetan artistic traditions to tell stories about cross-cultural interaction and globalization.

“The Seacoast has changed a lot in the past 20 years,” Sununu observes. “A lot of new companies have moved in, bringing people from more urban environments who have traveled extensively and been involved in more contemporary art scenes. They are looking to continue those experiences here, and the Portsmouth Museum of Art wants to be part of their cultural orbit.” When the museum first opened, there was skepticism that such a concept could work in Portsmouth. Through creativity and hard work, she and her staff demonstrated that an audience for their offerings exists. “I’m convinced that there are people in this area who believe in cultivating the next generation of artists,” Sununu concludes. “We just have to hope that we can find them and they can find us!” ■

FOR A LIST OF SOURCES, SEE PAGE 119

Serving the real estate needs of home buyers and sellers throughout the greater Seacoast.



**Amy Arguin Pender,
Carey & Giampa Realtors**

Buying or selling a home can be a monumental step in anyone’s life. I can provide you with the dedication and commitment you deserve when facing this milestone.



Carey & Giampa
REALTORS

560 High Street, Hampton, N.H. 03842
603 929-1100 x124 | cell: 603 502-8488
apender@careyandgiampa.com



Green Alliance Fact:

The Portsmouth Brewery donates used hops and malt to local pig farmers for feed.

Green Alliance Discount:

Green Alliance Card Members get 10% off all food and drink at the Brewery and great discounts at 95 other awesome local green businesses.

Buy a Green Alliance Membership Card and support local businesses that are making our community better.



www.greenalliance.biz