

## ***Beth Sellars has turned Suyama Space into one of the region's top art venues***

Features Beth Sellars and Suyama Space

By Regina Hackett

[Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#)

<http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Beth-Sellars-has-turned-Suyama-Space-into-one-of-1251421.php>

October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007



Curator Beth Sellars sits beside an installation by artist Mike Rathbun at Suyama Space, where she has created an arena in which she can operate without worrying about political pressure. She focuses on the artists she features and the way their work interacts with the raw look of the space.

Photo Courtesy of Karen Ducey

Beth Sellars knows where the art is. For 30 years, she has sought it out, organized it into exhibits and cheered it on at gallery openings and studio visits.

When Jack Daws and Faith Ramos took a portion of the roof off the Bridge Motel and built a campfire in Room 12 -- part of what became Seattle's art event of the season -- they knew they'd see Sellars in the crowd.

They were convinced that she wouldn't miss the chance to see artists pay homage to a seedy motel, and they were right. Ignoring the smoke in her eyes, she roasted marshmallows and drank beer, nodding to the Hank Williams soundtrack.

"She's everywhere," said Cris Bruch, who exhibited with her in 2000.

Ric Collier, director of the Salt Lake City Art Center, has known her since he was a box boy in a Boise grocery store and she was a customer.

"He'd follow me around, talking about art," she said. It's a conversation they are still having.

"The thing about Beth is, she's not in anyone's pocket," he said. "Too many curators are owned by collectors. Nobody owns Beth. She does exactly what she wants. I like to say, persist till you prevail. That's Beth."

Sellars, 69, began her career as a curator in Boise, spent some time in Spokane, and moved to Seattle in 1996. She now directs the art program at Suyama Space. It's the cavernous front room of architect George Suyama's office in Belltown. She persuaded him to turn it into an art space, wrote the grants to get funding and has run its program since 1998.

There's nothing quite like Suyama Space, an ad hoc art center with no consultants, no other curators and nobody to defer to except Suyama, who is pleased to let her lead.

With his backing and support from an art and architecture forum known as Space.City, Sellars has turned the space into one of the top art venues in the region, vying with established museums in terms of quality and presentation.

"Look at what Beth's done without any of the structure we ordinarily think is necessary," said Eric Fredericksen, director of Western Bridge. "She has a great record for shows and the energy to keep it going."

Good as she is as a curator, she wonders if she would have become one had it not been for a trauma in her mid-30s.

A painter in Boise who exhibited frequently, she was happily married with three children (another, Molly, died in infancy) when her 38-year-old husband collapsed from a cerebral hemorrhage on their 13-year-old daughter's birthday.

He was rushed to the hospital but didn't make it.

"He had time to wish our daughter happy birthday," she said. He was a beloved figure in the community, and more people came to the funeral than could have fit into two churches. Relatives and friends helped care for the children, especially her 4-year-old son, Matt -- now a sculptor who exhibits in Seattle at Platform Gallery.

"I don't remember that time well," says Sellars, "but a few months later I was sitting down and looking out the window. I said to myself, 'You have three kids. You are not going to make it as a painter in Idaho.' "

She married again several years later, but it didn't last.

"I never really worked through the grief, because I felt I couldn't. My kids were looking at me. I'd catch them out of the corner of my eye. They wanted to know that I was strong and wasn't going to die and leave them alone. I had to keep going." She gave up painting, a decision she says she doesn't regret. "I was average. I'd rather look at great art than make less-than-great art myself."

In 1975, the Boise Art Museum received a grant to hire an assistant to the director. In true Sellars fashion, she took the job, earned a master's degree in art history, became a visiting professor and then director of the gallery at the University of Idaho.

In 1982, she became visual art curator at Spokane's Cheney Cowles Museum, a job that earned her national attention, but not in a good way.

Oh, she was a dervish of art activity, organizing not just exhibits around the region, from Montana to Oregon, but poetry readings, lectures, film series and performances.

"Every Wednesday night there would be something at the museum," she said. "We filled the auditorium every week."

Creating a community with art at its center, however, could not have won her a place on Rush Limbaugh's radio show and triggered newspaper articles around the world.

Only a stumble could do that.

In 1992, she mounted "True Stories From Dot," as in, Dot, Mont., featuring sculptures by Dennis Voss and Ted Waddell. While Voss' work is pristine, Waddell decided to experiment with sculptural collages that included animal fur and skulls.

All would have gone well if Waddell had cleaned the horse trailer in which he had transported the art, she said.

"Thousands of flies hatched in the gallery. Right after that, thanks to Ted, there was also an infestation of dermestid beetles." The beetles were a critical problem because the museum contains historical Native American material. Dermestid beetles love baskets.

The museum closed while fumigators bombed the galleries.

Word got out. The Spokesman-Review covered the story on the front page. "I think the headline was, 'Museum Abuzz,' " she said.

Several days later, Limbaugh declared on his radio show that there was a "wooman curator" in Spokane, Wash., who thinks roadkill is art. "He talked about blood dripping on the gallery floor," she said. "Nothing like that happened, but it didn't matter. It's still known as the Roadkill Show."

She pasted a bumper sticker on her van saying "Flush Rush" and got back to work.

The list of artists who exhibited at Cheney Cowles is a who's who from around the region, but Sellars finally fell out with the museum over one of the Northwest's most important figures, Edward Kienholz, an artist born in Eastern Washington who had gone on to gain a worldwide reputation.

Thanks to his relationship with Sellars, Kienholz agreed to sell the museum one of five massive tableaux known as the "Jesus Corner" under terms favorable to a museum that otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford it. When the museum responded to the bulky jewel by putting it in storage, Sellars quit and moved to Seattle.

"My kids were grown," she said. "It was time to take a chance."

For five years, she was curator and collections manager for the Seattle Arts Commission, now known as the Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs. The job had its high points, mostly talking to city employees about what kind of art they wanted in their offices, getting them to stretch beyond their initial impressions, but she found the commission itself depressing.

"I think of the Seattle Arts Commission in the 1970s and early 1980s, what a brave and adventurous place it was, and how hollow it became. Life is too short to spend it at a place that puts politics above art. There's not a lot of public art that's challenging or powerful today, because art administrators are afraid to take risks."

At Suyama Space, she created the arena in which she could operate without worrying about political pressure. It's all about the artists she features and the way their work interacts with the raw, old-barn look of the space.

The space works for her, too, because it evokes the spaces of her childhood. She grew up in a rural area of Southern California, near San Diego. Her father taught art at the local high school and built their house from dirt, forming it into bricks.

"He did it all," she said. "I think of my dad sometimes, watching him build a house from nothing. From him I learned that all things are possible."