

VISUAL
ART



SITE SPECIFIC

Belltown's Suyama Space to close its doors after 19 years of inspiring great art

BY JIM DEMETRE
PHOTO BY HAYLEY YOUNG

FOR VISITORS WHO MAKE THEIR WAY down the narrow hallway leading to Suyama Space, the experience can be surprising and sublime. What they see there often upends their basic presumptions and expectations about art. While people are used to conceiving of art as objects or video projections in a gallery or museum format, the works built within Suyama Space are immersive and straddle the realms of sculpture and concept.

Suyama Space is the gallery within the offices of Suyama Peterson Deguchi, one of Seattle's preeminent architecture firms. And the figure at the center of the project is curator and co-founder Beth Sellars, who has held the role since the gallery opened in 1998. Sellars was given free rein by George Suyama (featured in "Creative Space" on page 98) to mount shows in the space, shortly after Suyama moved his firm into the Belltown building. From the beginning, Sellars has invited artists—from the promising to the prominent—to propose an idea for an art installation to inhabit and respond to the physical space. She selects three shows a year, and artists are given two years to develop the work prior to its creation on site, where it is displayed for three months.

"There isn't anything else like it," says Sellars. "The artists are all required to respond to the exact same space year after year, and yet every installation response is different. I think that's what's really brought people back for repeat visits, because they're fascinated with the idea that a sculptural piece or sculptural architecture could elicit so many responses."

Suyama Space curator Beth Sellars (left) goes above and beyond to find innovative artists, such as Patte Loper (right), whose "Seeking Higher Ground" installation is at the Belltown gallery through August 19

Soon, there truly won't be anything like it in Seattle: Last November, George Suyama announced that the gallery would close its doors at the end of 2016 after a remarkable 19-year run. Sellars, who is just beginning to pull together materials to create a retrospective coffee table book of all the installations, says the architecture firm itself is evolving and considering what's next.

While Suyama Space exhibitions may have had a powerful impact upon viewers, they've had an equally transformative effect on the artists who have shown there. Many have seen their focus shift from a traditional studio practice of creating objects to a more ambitious approach. For Sellars, the exhibits have led to programming that, while rigorous, maintains an improvisational spirit that distinguishes the space from other venues in Seattle and beyond.

Sellars cites a moment early in the history of the space to illustrate the special sense of trust that characterized the relationship between her, George Suyama and the exhibiting artists. In 1999, after curating several successful one-person exhibits of sculptural works at the space, she was putting together a group show of five two-dimensional artists titled *Drawing Space*. One of the artists she was considering was a young Victoria Haven, who had recently returned to Seattle from graduate school and was experimenting with various media.

"I remember the pieces I had were small, 4 by 4 inches," says Haven, describing the visit Sellars and Suyama made to her studio. "I explained I was interested in taking that little shape and 'proliferating it' across a large expanse, in a form I didn't know yet. It would involve nails and a hammer. And rubber bands. And time. They conferred, then invited me to be in the show, offering me a beautiful vertical wall to work on."

This meeting, and Haven's resulting work, defined Suyama Space's approach to programming from that point on, says Sellars. Haven spent a month hammering hundreds of nails to the wall near the architect's office, relocating them again and again to construct her piece.

"She took that wall and responded to the

shape of it, to the light that draped down over it," Sellars says. "She kicked us into this whole new direction. From then on, artists we invited would have to first come in and spend time in the space, respond to it, then make a proposal, and we would decide if we thought it will work or not."

The ensuing 16 years have included countless examples of artists whose work experienced shifts after creating installations inside the space. Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo, Seattle's celebrated art and architecture duo Lead Pencil Studio, were invited to create a piece for the space in 2004, which they called "Linear Plenum." They filled the space with more than 100 miles of nylon line, reorienting the visitor's relationship to its three dimensions. "Until then, we were making sculptures and objects in spaces," Han says. "Our interest in architecture and space came together at Suyama Space as an installation that occupied every inch of the space and expanded our approach to sculpture and installation from there on."

Lead Pencil would go on to produce work that would continue the artists' dialogue between art and architecture, such as their 2006 piece "Maryhill Double," a full-scale replica of the Maryhill Museum in Goldendale, Washington, built of scaffolding and construction netting.

"To me, it's really heartwarming to see that growth," says Sellars, adding that Suyama Space paid its artists a fee as well as the costs of installation, and supported them through publication and exposure in order to give them the chance to be spontaneous and the freedom to create. These artists' transformations are the true legacy Suyama Space will leave behind.

"It's sad that we won't have [Suyama Space] available for artists to respond to anymore—but there might be even more incredible spaces that will open up," Sellars says. "Hopefully, we will have set a precedent that people will try to follow, to emulate in some way." 5

Suyama Space is free and open to the public 9 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Friday, Belltown, 2324 Second Ave.; 206.256.0809; suyamaspace.org. For details of the current installation, see "Patte Loper" on page 148.