

**Head: Prichard Art Gallery pivots to keep “heart of the arts” beating**

The walls of the Prichard Art Gallery are not bare, but few people admiring the works that line them know just how close they came.

There are still artworks in hues of mossy green and bark brown in the airy, brightly lit atrium. Families still peruse the small gift shop after having brunch right across Main Street and groups of high schoolers still crane their necks to see exhibits dangling just above their heads.

You wouldn't expect to find any of this wonder in a nondescript gray building flanked by a fitness club and a thrift store. But the Prichard Art Gallery, a contemporary art space operated for the last 30 years by the University of Idaho, feels as close to New York or Paris as you can get in Moscow, Idaho.

Not many casual visitors to the Prichard might know, though, that this singular connection to a whole world of contemporary art came close to being severed.

“If Moscow is the ‘heart of the arts,’ it felt like cutting the Prichard of all things was a slap in the face,” said local graphic designer Ethan Coy, referencing the slogan emblazoned on the city's welcome sign.

Despite a lack of funding and a pandemic following close on its heels, Coy and other local creators felt the Prichard's mission was worth preserving. Soon, the space will be home to a reimagined gallery that its backers hope will last generations to come.

Coy sees the Prichard as downtown's hidden gem. He never paid the gallery's exhibitions much attention as a freshman at UI, but gradually came to realize the privilege of having internationally renowned artists accessible in his small college town - it fed the work of emerging creators like himself.

That kind of education and exposure was exactly what the Prichard was created to offer, according to Shauna Corry, the dean of UI's College of Art and Architecture, which runs the off-campus gallery. But after a devastating university-wide budget shortfall in late 2019, ripple effects reached every branch of the institution.

"Our faculty was stuck with the choice of closing a degree program or closing the Prichard, no way around it," Corry said. "We chose the Prichard because we knew it would come back."

Corry and her faculty scraped together enough funding to keep the gallery running through 2020, and for a while it looked like donors and endowments might be enough to sustain the Prichard for a little while longer.

Then came the pandemic. Donors' wallets tightened. University administrators were understandably too busy pivoting to online classes and figuring out student housing to pay the Prichard much attention, said former gallery director Roger Rowley.

Rowley's contract with the university was not renewed for 2021, and his assistant director went part-time. The gallery closed for pandemic lockdowns, then reopened with limited hours. It seemed inevitable that the Prichard would close by summer.

"We could have given up and said 'screw it, we'll go to the cities and we'll be welcomed,'" Rowley said. "But there's something important going on here. There's this ethos of openness and creativity that's always existed in Moscow."

Rowley and a coalition of supporters wanted to keep tapping into that ethos, with or without university funding. They formed Moscow Contemporary, soon to become a registered nonprofit, with the hopes of taking over the current Prichard space and keeping it running with a more youthful and energized spirit.

Passersby may not see the subtle transformations to the space right away when Moscow Contemporary takes over, hopefully within the year, said Coy, now a marketing consultant for the group. But there will be new styles of art, diverse perspectives, more community programming and - most importantly in Coy's mind - new people taking the time to take in the art and appreciate what they could have lost.

The gallery's new backers envision a space that uses the grief of a rough year in the Prichard's and the community's history to offer something better and bolder.

“After the pandemic I think there is this push to nurture each other, to nurture the community,” Coy said. “The Prichard has always been a center for that sort of gathering and learning, and with a new approach and deeper context for what we present, it will feel much more exciting and fresh and new.”

Rowley said Moscow Contemporary aims to carry on the spirit of the Prichard while reckoning with the events of the past year, reflecting social justice movements and pandemic trauma through art. And he wants to see that contemporary consciousness carry on in perpetuity, as long as the heart of the arts is still beating.

“I can't imagine Moscow without a gallery on Main Street,” Rowley said. “We're going to keep Moscow weird - we're going to keep doing what it takes to do that until it's proven that we can't.”

Sources:

Interviews with Dr. Shauna Corry, Roger Rowley, Ethan Coy

Written statement from Prichard associate director Sonja Foard