

At the Museum: Winter speakers bring diverse perspectives to Newport

NEWPORT — Each January, the Newport Art Museum opens its doors to an eclectic mix of experts and luminaries, bringing together a group of talented speakers to share global perspectives, informative topics and inspiring stories with the local community.

The Winter Speaker Series — which in the 1920s as a platform for discourse in the arts — has evolved to accommodate a range of subjects, tackling ideas that are as diverse as they are fascinating.

“About eight years ago, we felt that we were too focused on a small audience of interests,” says Dick Hunt, chairman of the museum’s Winter Speaker Series Committee. “We were more art and culture oriented, and decided to spread out to see if we could collect interest from a broader and more youthful segment of society.”

The effort to bring in a wider body of talent led Hunt and other committee members to begin the process of choosing speakers early last summer. With as many as 40 possible people on the docket, months of negotiations and deliberations between committee members distilled the list down to just a handful of candidates.

“Sometimes we pick the subject first,” Hunt said, citing the fact that the committee wanted to include an individual that could address the topic of ISIS and their destruction of historic cultural artifacts. “We have a really brilliant woman on the committee, Eleanor Doumato, who previously taught at the Watson Institute at Brown (University). She knows a lot about the Middle East, and would not just settle for just any speaker to fill the topic.

“She went for the best person she could find, and that’s how we got Tess Davis. Davis is very passionate and knowledgeable about this issue, and was a terrific find for us. We worked hard to get her.”

Other times, Hunt said, the committee selected individuals due to their ability to entertain and inform audiences on broadly relevant issues, pointing to the topic of politics and speaker Darrell West, who serves as vice president of Governance Studies and Director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution.

“We know we had a crazy election this year,” Hunt admitted. “Our audience is not one-sided, and we don’t want the series to be homogeneous. West is one of the really knowledgeable guys in this field and knows how to bring it to both sides of the aisle. He’s smart and very humorous, and we want speakers that are entertaining and informative to all. We have no ideologies in this thing.”

As far as picking a favorite from this year’s lineup, Hunt said it’s hard for him to choose.

“Personally, I’m very interested in Pamela Parmal’s discussion on the intersection of technology and fashion, but I get excited every week,” Hunt said. “The best things to learn are the things you’re unfamiliar with, and that’s the whole purpose of this series: to provide people with access to ideas they might not have yet considered.”

Each talk in the series takes place Saturdays at 2 p.m. throughout January and February, and West kicks off the event Jan. 7. He will discuss America’s current political climate and explore issues surrounding the incoming Trump administration.

Following West is renowned glassblower William Gudenrath on Jan. 14, who will examine the world of contemporary art glass through the lens of historic techniques, all while noting relevant works within the museum’s permanent collection.

Executive director of the Antiquities Coalition, Tess Davis, will address the rampant destruction of historic cultural artifacts by ISIS, and offer insight on what the world community can do to address the problem on Jan. 21.

Next, the synergy between technology and fashion will be explored on Jan. 28 by Parmal, curator of textile and fashion arts at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

On Feb. 4, Chris Waddell will share his inspiring story of overcoming the challenges of paraplegia to become a leading monoski medalist and conquer Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Janice Hodson, curator at the New Bedford Free Library, will discuss on Feb. 11 her recent exhibition on Albert Bierstadt, the “Accidental Artist of Manifest Destiny” whose landscapes of the American west inspired a nation.

The series comes to a close Feb. 25 with Bruce Coriss, Dean of the Graduate School of Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island, who will cover the various environmental issues facing the global oceans, and explore current initiatives and means to address them.