



Pelham Art Center

April 2011

Question and answer session between Alexi Rutsch Brock, Pelham Art Center Gallery Advisory Board Member and Rutsch Juror, and Nina Rizzo, winner of the 2011 Alexander Rutsch Award.

**Alexi Rutsch Brock: When and where were you born?**

**Nina Rizzo:** I was born in Chicago, Illinois on September 7th, 1974. I have lived in several other cities and towns but returned there in 2006 to take the teaching position I currently hold at Northern Illinois University, which is an hour west of Chicago.

**ARB: What experiences from your childhood influenced your interest and participation in art?**

**NR:** I was fortunate to grow up in Chicago's downtown where there are major museums, both art and non-art. The proximity to those places allowed me to become accustomed to seeing many amazing paintings some people only get to see once, if at all. My family and teachers were always very supportive of my interest in art, both as a viewer and a participant.

**ARB: Why and/or how did you become an artist?**

**NR:** Before college, I had no idea that one could be a professional artist living and working in contemporary times. It was because of the teachers I had when I first began taking art courses at the college level that I saw it was possible to make this a career and not a side interest. My original major was Political Science. I switched to art after taking two painting courses for general education credit.

**ARB: Where do you find inspiration for your art?**

**NR:** This is a difficult concept to narrow down, since so many things interest me and I end up relating them to my work. More often than outside sources, a painting will lead to the next one. It is in the act of painting that I discover the ideas which I will want to address in a new work.

**ARB: Who are some of your favorite artists?**

NR: This is another difficult question since I don't want to exclude anyone's work that has been important to me. I seem to go in phases where I will be very interested in a particular artist and then transition into another. There are a few that I return to time and time again, at museums when I can see the work in person and in books when I can read about that artist's life surrounding dialogue. Some of the constants, who have been influential to me from the start of my education include Edouard Manet, Sigmar Polke, Willem de Kooning, Max Ernst and Wayne Thiebaud.

**ARB: What are your creative, visual and conceptual concerns for the current pieces you are working on?**

NR: Lately, I have been thinking a lot about how to incorporate text as a seemingly naturally occurring part of an image. I have also been concerned with season change and transition, both conceptually and visually. *Big, Black Snowpile* comes from this. I want to see if I can develop paintings that are related to a specific and distinct time of year, which would of course have much to do with visual light and temperature.

**ARB: Please tell me about 3 “themes” of your artwork that are on display at the PAC; The chandeliers in strange spaces, the cacti and the icebergs.**

NR: The chandeliers evolved out of an interest in exterior vs. interior space, and image vs. abstraction. If you include a chandelier in a painting, it instantly becomes an interior space, even without any other indicators.

I lived in Austin, Texas for 5 years while attending graduate school and teaching at The University of Texas. The Nopale (Prickly Pear) cactus I paint are common there, in gardens, on roadsides, and in the grocery stores and tacos. I admired the Nopale's ability to take on shapes that reference other forms, such as creatures, body parts, and shelters. I also became interested in the cactus as an item that can make a painting hover in between being a landscape and being a still life.

The icebergs exist, for me, as a form that can take on any shape. While painting them, I can soften them, make them jagged, pointed, arched...anything that suits the needs of the painting. They are, in many ways, an architecture that does not follow the limits of human logic. They are also an example of

a frozen liquid we understand as landscape which paint, too, has often been.

**ARB: Can you share your process of titling your work? It really adds a whole other layer for the viewer.**

NR: Often, the title of one of my paintings will be a description of a goal I had when starting the painting. In *Salt Mine Symmetry*, the title includes the two elements I wanted to pair up- one abstract and one image based- in the painting. These would be the pinwheel symmetry of the composition and the depiction of pink salt crystals there.

In other paintings, the title serves as an explanation. In *Armature for the Inside of a Snowman's Head*, a viewer may not be certain what they are looking at until they refer to the title. Since it is an unseen and invented form (however, it is painted partially from observation), the title is necessary. *Dog Fur Interior with Chandelier* follows this same idea and was also invented, yet painted from observation.