

VOGUE

Meet Susan Sutton, the New Head of Ballroom Marfa and Unofficial Ambassador of Texas's Art Mecca

JANUARY 5, 2015

by MARK GUIDUCCI



Photo: Zina Saro-Wiwa

You might say the Texas town of Marfa (population: 1,800) has two governing bodies, and neither is housed at the local City Hall. The first is the Chinati Foundation, a museum that abides by the principles of its founder, Donald Judd, and preserves his vision of large-scale permanent sculptures. And the other is Ballroom Marfa, which, over its eleven-year history, has funded a slew of experimental projects (the most Instagrammable being Elmgreen and Dragset's Prada Marfa under the stewardship of its founders, Virginia Lebermann and Fairfax Dorn).

“Counterpoints” is how Susan Sutton, Ballroom’s newly appointed executive director, describes the relationship between the two institutions. Among art-world stalwarts, Ballroom is thought of as Chinati’s younger, more carefree cousin. Headquartered in a 1920s building that was once—yes—a ballroom, Ballroom Marfa is more than a literally minded name. “The ethos of a ballroom is interdisciplinary,” Sutton explains. “When you think about dancing and music and performance and an active space, the idea of a ballroom makes sense for what we do.”

Sutton stepped into her new role this fall after a four-year stint at the Menil Collection in Houston, where she was a relative newcomer. In Marfa, she is something of a veteran. Sutton first visited the town in 2007 for a New Year's party, where she found herself "dancing next to a ranch hand, next to an artist, next to the public-school janitor, next to a New York collector." After her appointment in late September, the 35-year-old spent her first day as a Marfa resident at a performance by composer (and Richard Linklater collaborator) Graham Reynolds that, as she describes it, sounded more like a land-art installation than outdoor concert. Once she got her cowboy boots sorted, Sutton fit right in.

Sutton brings an institutional background and scholarly disposition to Ballroom, which has largely thrived on the unwavering passion of its supporters, including board members Matthew Day Jackson, Allison Sarofim, and Leo Villareal. (Dorn, a cofounder who formerly served as executive director, is now Ballroom's artistic director.) "There's been incredible experimentation at Ballroom," Sutton says. "It's a really ripe moment to take pause and review and ask what we've done, what have been our highlights, how does that best express Ballroom, and how can we capitalize on that going forward?"

Sutton's first real test will come this spring, when Ballroom hosts its annual music festival, Mexican Summer, a collaboration with the indie record label of the same name. The festival will coincide with an exhibition of new work by Los Angeles-based artist Sam Falls. "Mexican Summer ultimately represents what Ballroom does best," Sutton says. "In an interdisciplinary spirit, we have emerging musicians come in, actually have a residency, create new work, then perform. A recording will come out, and we'll produce poster artwork as well. That's where I think Ballroom's programming is going in the future: It will be a genesis or seed for new work."