College gallery director wants its vision to grow

Cerritos: Sculptor Andrea Bronte aims to inspire students, draw community.

By Jenny Marder
Staff writer

NORWALK — When Andrea Bronte looks at a work of art, she sees more than just paint on a canvas, or a form shaped from clay.

She approaches each piece as a snapshot of an individual's feelings and experiences.

"Art gives me an opportunity to look into the mind of the artist," she said.

The 38-year-old sculptor began last week as the new art gallery director at Cerritos College.

Steven Portugel, chair of the art department, said he expects Bronte, whose resume boasts a laundry list of prominent art institutions, to raise the gallery to a new level.

"She is by far the most qualified art director we've had in my 13 years," Portugel said.

Bronte was chosen for her experience, her professionalism and, especially, her understanding of the vision and purpose of art in an educational environment, Portugel said.

"Part of what we saw in her was somebody who would really fit in with our group and work collaboratively and cooperatively with us," he said. "She understands what is necessary to work with a group of people and we're all distinct individuals."

Bronte received her bachelor's degree in painting from San Diego State University and her masters from the California Institute of the Arts.

Most recently, she comes from the Rose Gallery in Santa Monica, where she served as associate director. Before then, she worked as a senior preparator and exhibition designer for the UCLA/ Hammer Museum and the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena.

Portugel lauds the gallery's role in the art department to that of concerts and plays in the college's music and theater departments.

'Our public face'

"It's our public face," he said. "It serves as a place for us to display student work and faculty work."

The gallery director knows what our needs are and we can show them that will augment what's going on in classrooms. Teachers can bring students to show them what they're talking about in art history class. It provides us with an additional educational opportunity."

Bronte will serve as a jack-of-all-trades for the department. She will design exhibitions, organize the exhibition calendar, curate, select work, select community artists, design announcements, plan receptions and book guest speakers.

The transition from the private sector to an academic institution is a welcome change for the new director, who expects the environment at the college to focus more on art as experience and less on the retail aspect, than the commercial sector does.

"Here, our media viewership at Cerritos College will be the student body," she said. "The average age is probably between 19 and 23 years old. I'm really interested in contributing to a community where hopefully I can inspire young artists to become professional artists in their own way."

The gallery attracts more than 500 visitors a year, mostly from the campus community, and Bronte wants to increase that number, in part by luring people from the community.

She also plans to cultivate the relationship between the gallery and artists in the community. As part of a $210 million bond approved by voters in March, the department's goal is to restore the gallery to its previous location on campus, where the dance studio currently sits.

"The gallery is currently hidden in a stealth location," Portugel said. "It's hard to find. It's far from ideal. The idea is that we put the gallery back into that original location so that it faces the center of campus."

In the meantime, Bronte's goal is threefold, as she said: "to serve the student body, to interface with the art faculty and to provide programs that are of significance and relevance to the student body."

The 1,600-square-foot gallery is building AC-50, just left of parking lot C-9. It is closed until Aug. 30, when it will host an art faculty exhibition for two months. Regular gallery hours are Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Tuesday and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. For information, call (562) 903-2451, ext. 2612. The campus is on Alondra Boulevard at Studebaker Road.