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The Miller Gallery's internationally renowned new curator, Astria Suparak, debuts her first Pittsburgh show.

BY BILL O'DRISCOLL

Linkin' tunnel: Astria Suparak (left) and Julia Christensen get inside Christensen's Your Town, Inc., at Miller Gallery.

On the second floor of a Carnegie Mellon art gallery, Astria Suparak stands in a parking space. Suparak doesn't own a car, but the space is here because of her. Its white lines were painted as part of Julia Christensen's *Your Town, Inc.*, an exhibit about how communities have reused buildings abandoned by big-box retailers. It's Suparak's first show as director of CMU's Miller Gallery, and a parking space is an apt symbol for it.

Suparak made her name as a globetrotting independent curator. Now she's parked at CMU; her hiring, in March, makes her arguably the biggest underground art star to move to Pittsburgh in years.

In fact, Suparak became a *cause celebre* when she was fired by Syracuse University last year. And *Your Town's* theme of reclaiming turf has a double meaning: Suparak says she's interested in "the idea of making this gallery my own, making this city my own."



Suparak, 30, grew up in Los Angeles and cut her teeth on DIY, riot-grrrl culture. While studying drawing at New York's famed Pratt Institute, she put those principles into practice by launching a twice-weekly film- and video-screening series, which later included performance, live music and visual art.

After graduating in 2000, she kept going, exploring women's issues and queer identity as well as formal experimentation. She curated work for ground-breaking performance artist and filmmaker Miranda July, and for the New York Underground Film Festival. Often, Suparak took her programs on the road -- not only to colleges and theaters, but also to sports bars, skating rinks and churches. Once, she packed members of post-rock group Boxhead Ensemble on a bus to accompany cross-country screenings of abstract and conceptual videos at cinematheques and night clubs.

"She was curating some of the best stuff in the country, and doing it in unusual and unexpected ways," says CMU art professor Jon Rubin, whose work Suparak has featured, and who recruited her for CMU. "She kind of created her own model of how to be a curator."



With black bangs and funky-chic look, Suparak cuts a striking figure. But while she "may look like a rock star," wrote one critic in *The Independent Film and Video* magazine, "the ethos of a hardcore film nerd rumbles inside." One of her programs, *Dirges and Sturgeons*, employed old-school media, like analog video, to critique high technology and mass culture, as with one artist's personal history of cloning and biotech reproduction. A traveling show of video by young women, *Looking Is Better Than Feeling You*, featured "Bouncing in the Corner, #36DDD," a surveillance-style video of a naked woman gleefully jumping up and down in the corner of a room. (*Looking* was one of two programs Suparak screened in a 2003 visit to Pittsburgh.)

Such efforts drew critical raves, and in her early 20s, Suparak amassed curatorial credits in Montreal, Mexico City, London and Germany. In 2006, Syracuse University recruited her to launch what became the Warehouse Gallery.

Suparak's Syracuse shows attracted crowds, local TV coverage and positive reviews. But behind the scenes, she clashed with supervisor Jeffrey Hoone, head of the school's Coalition of Museums and Art Centers.

Hoone asked Suparak to resign in March 2007, saying her performance was lacking and that she wasn't doing enough to program shows in advance. Suparak contested those claims, but six months later, Hoone fired her.

The dismissal came during the run of *COME ON: Desire Under the Female Gaze*, whose work Suparak called "unabashed explorations and unapologetic articulations of female libido." The exhibit included large-scale male nudes and Rachel Rampleman's video "Poison: My Sister Fucked Bret," in which the artist's sister recounted her relationship with Poison lead singer Bret Michaels.

The show drew no outcry, and at the time, Hoone cited "restructuring" as the reason for the firing. But Suparak and her supporters suspected that sexual content was the issue. A protest was held outside the gallery; dozens of supporters wrote the university to object. One letter of support was signed by the five chairs of the school's College of Visual and Performing Arts, who asserted that Syracuse was "absolutely starving for what Astria Suparak has brought." Shortly after her firing, the Syracuse city council voted to appoint Suparak to the city's Public Art Commission.

Hoone now says he fired Suparak because she "emphasized style over substance." He cites *Embracing Winter*, which included such curatorial touches as a rack of snow shovels visitors could borrow. In Suparak's exhibitions, Hoone charges, "the artists became fodder for her own self-promotion."

But that seems a minority opinion. "It was a great experience," says Rudy Shepherd, a New York artist featured in *Embracing Winter*. And in a November blog post, *Syracuse Post-Standard* art critic Katherine Rushworth wrote that Suparak provided "a quality and a range of shows that no other venue in the area was offering -- a breath of fresh air."



Suparak's first show at the Miller Gallery consists of nearly 80 photographs from artist Julia Christensen's forthcoming MIT Press book, *Big Box Reuse*. Christensen has spent six years documenting how former big-box buildings -- discarded when their owners built bigger stores nearby -- have been converted into everything from a grade school and a mega-church to a Spam museum.

Suparak calls the tone of *Your Town, Inc.* "critical yet optimistic." The exhibit also features a large wooden structure meant as the antithesis of a big box: It's portable, modular, and was built in Oberlin, Ohio, where Christensen teaches, from locally sourced materials. The show reflects Suparak's interest in community, the built environment and sustainability. She plans a series of lectures and other events around the show, including a Sept. 19 "Hometown BBQ" reception.

Indeed, her first season at the Miller is all about social engagement -- or, as Suparak puts it, "helping people to think of their situation and their role in society in different ways." It is likely the first thematically unified season at the Miller Gallery, where Suparak replaces interim director Petra Fallaux, and where the university had long sought a stronger curatorial hand. The next show, for instance, is *Keep It Slick: Infiltrating Capitalism with The Yes Men*, about the notorious pair of performance artists who expose greed and injustice by posing as corporate types. The show was to have been Suparak's follow-up to *COME ON* at Syracuse, but The Yes Men declined to pursue it after she was fired.

Suparak says that after Syracuse, she was "maybe initially" gun-shy about doing provocative programming here. Now, she says, "I really appreciate how Carnegie Mellon supports creative inquiry."

CMU College of Fine Arts Dean Hilary Robinson, who calls the Syracuse situation "extremely unfortunate," says, "We are in the business of producing young and exciting artists. ... I think Astria will be able to do that for us."

Suparak is also reaching out to other arts groups. She plans collaborations with the Carnegie Museum of Art, The Andy Warhol Museum and Pittsburgh Filmmakers, among others.

"I'm overjoyed that we got her," says CMU professor Rubin. "I think she's gonna be an interesting force in the city."

Your Town, Inc. Aug. 29-Nov. 23. Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon campus, Oakland. 412-268-3618 or www.cmu.edu/millergallery