

## An Old Tobacco Complex Turned Arts Hub Evolves as the Carrack Appoints a New Leader and SPECTRE Arts Closes

By Brian Howe



Photos by Caitlin Penna

Left: Laura Ritchie at the Carrack. Right: Alicia Lange at SPECTRE.

The **Carrack Modern Art** and **SPECTRE Arts** are separate entities, but fate seems intent on linking them.

First, SPECTRE founding director Alicia Lange paved the way for the Carrack's relocation from Parrish Street to the Golden Belt area. Now, by coincidence, both galleries are undergoing major transitions at the same time. SPECTRE closed at the end of April; this week, the Carrack appointed a new leader after being synonymous with founding director Laura Ritchie since its inception.

Both shifts have to do with Lange's and Ritchie's unrelated personal trajectories, but both were also shaped by Golden Belt's rapid development and Durham's as a whole.

In 2011, just out of college, Ritchie cofounded the Carrack with John Wendelbo, who left the project after a year or so. She had a vision for a zero-commission gallery—meaning artists keep all the money from their sales—and event space that would also serve as a community resource. The question of what "community" means gained definition and urgency as local development accelerated. While trying to figure it out, Ritchie made a creaky loft above Loaf a social hub and a Third Friday anchor.

In 2013, when Alicia Lange bought a former church on Morning Glory Avenue, she had something else in mind. SPECTRE Arts was also a

community space with events, but one driven more by professional than emerging locals, with artists such as Harrison Haynes keeping studios in the back. It opened with an exhibit that included the documentary photography of Jeremy Lange, Alicia Lange's husband, and live music by Mount Moriah. Until then, pop-up exhibits and open studio nights at Golden Belt had been the only reason for Third Friday hoppers to cross the mile from downtown to East Main, but the addition of the smaller, more accessible SPECTRE was a magnet.

By 2016, the Carrack was feeling the crunch of rising costs and construction as the One City Center project created blockages on Corcoran and Parrish Streets. But by then, Lange had purchased another, larger building by Golden Belt. She named it the Torus Building and installed artist studios. It shared a courtyard with SPECTRE. **It was a fit for the Carrack**, replicating the old gallery's wooden floors and tile ceilings in a ground-level space clad in artist studios. With SPECTRE and the Carrack there, Golden Belt finally felt like the vital community arts hub it always wanted to be.

Meanwhile, Durham Artists Movement, an itinerant group focusing on artists who were marginalized in mainstream art spaces, took over the remainder of the Carrack's 2016 lease on Parrish. DAM was led in part by a local artist called Saba Taj. This foreshadowed the Carrack's future more than anyone would have guessed at the time.

SPECTRE closed after another exhibit by Jeremy Lange, *After Golden Leaf*. This was especially apt because its subject was the history of tobacco in a city whose infrastructure was partly built on the industry. Long before it gave way to arts studios and shops, the Golden Belt Manufacturing Co. made linen bags in which tobacco was sold.

"That really spoke to the history and culture of Durham, showing this change by being in this space surrounded by this change," Alicia Lange says, on the patio at Cocoa Cinnamon. Her decision to close SPECTRE after five years had more to do with this general sense of transition, in Durham and in her life, than with any single driving factor.

"I'm a parent. I'm an artist. I'm a wife," she says. "I think in project terms, and it just felt like time to move on to the next project. I thought about finding someone else to run it, but I realized that a specter is, in essence, a ghost. It doesn't need to be tied to anything. It just roams, and that's sort of who I am."

While running SPECTRE, Lange was traveling far and wide, bringing news of Durham art to other places and bringing artists from those places back here. This kind of connection is both her passion and the subject of the PhD in philosophy, aesthetics, and art theory she's been pursuing through the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, which she'll now have time to finish.

"My practice has always centered around identity and environment, which brought me to renovate these buildings and work with people to see how space activates them and how they activate space," Lange says. "We're the ones that build these buildings. We're also the ones that engage within them. We change them, we create them, we destroy them, but we're all doing it."

The SPECTRE building has been posted for rent since it closed. "You want to have a good neighbor," Lange says. "And Golden Belt is doing all of this building that's centered around arts and arts retail. With the Torus Building full of artists, I'd love to find someone who wants to engage with that."

Lange says that although SPECTRE no longer exists as a location, this doesn't mean it no longer exists. In a way, after breaking ground for the Carrack to come to Golden Belt, SPECTRE is now free to become something else, though Lange is taking her time figuring out what that might be.

"The Carrack being in the Torus Building is great. That has brought a whole new life," she says. "SPECTRE is not ceasing to exist as an entity, just flourishing in a different way. This was sort of a graduate school dream with a bunch of people I know who became professionals in different areas: having a space to test out ideas and to discover. I think that was accomplished. I learned that nothing's constant. Everything changes."

Before she announced in April that she was stepping down, Laura Ritchie had been thinking about it for a while.

"I love this work, but my energy for it has been waning," she says, on the patio behind the Carrack, which looks down across the courtyard onto what was recently SPECTRE. "For it to remain experimental and community oriented, you need new vision. I just turned thirty, and I stepped into this project when I was twenty-two, thinking it was something I would do for a year. It's been an intimate, deep relationship I've put all my energy into for all my adult life so far. It's super bittersweet, cleaning out my office, but it feels really right."

Ritchie knew the Carrack needed to achieve stability before it could be handed off to someone else. After working for free for the first several years, she'd wound up with a part-time stipend of about \$8,000 a year. And that was contingent on her pouring in copious volunteer hours, something she couldn't ask of someone else.

Though shoestring and grassroots from the start, the Carrack had always been tacking toward sustainability. Fairly early, it secured fiscal sponsorship from Fractured Atlas, which allowed it to function like a nonprofit. Eventually, its fundraising efforts grew robust enough to pay a few key staffers. Ritchie built an advisory board that includes ten members as well as a dedicated volunteer staff. Now, the Carrack is applying for 501(c)(3) status. The right people and systems were in place. It was time.

One of those right people was operations director Kerry Crocker, a part-time employee who came on three years ago as the organizer of the Muse Masquerade, the Carrack's major annual fundraiser at 21c Museum Hotel, and stayed on to help Ritchie organize the Carrack's systems. She'll continue to support the new director.

"The Carrack is a lot of work, and I've seen how much of a toll it can take," Crocker says. "Laura kind of made it her baby, and now she's sending her baby off to college."

Ritchie has been working toward a master's degree at Duke focusing on the relationship between arts, economic development, and gentrification. "I'm definitely not leaving the Carrack to do school, but [these studies] have made me feel open to other types of work that still center on advocacy for the arts community in Durham," she says.

Changing the rules about access and leadership in the art world has always been a Carrack principle—one that was tested and refined by the gallery's move to East Main. It was paramount in the search for a new director. When Ritchie told her board about her intention to step down, they wrote a job description—they'd never thought to write one before—of a part-time position that paid about double what Ritchie made. She says they received a flood of qualified applicants.

"We are extremely locally focused," Ritchie says. "It's a foundational part of our mission to provide opportunities to artists who are underrepresented, including artists of color, queer and trans artists, emerging artists, and artists making experimental or temporal work that doesn't fit into traditional commercial gallery model."

Not only had Saba Taj developed a relationship with the Carrack through DAM, she had also been part of many exhibits at the gallery, and her work covered the range of art and activism the Carrack needed to truly honor its mission statement.

"She's deeply connected to her art practice and has demonstrated a commitment to lifting up artists in this community, certainly those underrepresented voices," Ritchie says. "And she bridges the gap between community and professional art worlds. She uses art in activism and also received her MFA from UNC-Chapel Hill. I think Saba will push the Carrack to support artists of color more. One thing I have struggled with is upholding that mission in our staff structures. The wonderfully diverse arts community in Durham is what makes it a *thing*, but leadership is still fairly monolithic. I think Saba will push that conversation forward."

Ritchie's last day is Friday. Taj, whose directorship was announced at an emotional going-away party for Ritchie in the courtyard Saturday night, starts the next day.

"I've loved the Carrack for a long time, and the same things that motivated me in DAM come into play," Taj says. "My work is responsive to the lack of representation of marginalized individuals within art and institutions. I've seen the Carrack make intentional shifts about who is represented, and that's something that can be extended even further. How we're existing in a gentrifying Durham feels like a huge question, and through engaging with it in many different ways, I've been able to see the different layers. I'm excited to work with other folks in Durham to bring folks in in a much bigger way than we've ever done before."

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Tags: Arts Feature, visual art, The Carrack Modern Art, SPECTRE Arts, Laura Ritchie, Alicia Lange, Saba Taj, Golden Belt, Durham development

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