

**Art(work) Interview Series****An Interview with Mike Oechsli***Installation and Facilities Manager at the ICA*

Each week during the month of March, we'll share an interview with one of the artists featured in our current group exhibition *Art(work)*, featuring the work of the ICA's installation team Mike Oechsli, Cynthia Cao, Damian Kelly, and Martie Guile.

We're starting the series by sharing an insightful interview with the ICA's Installation and Facilities Manager of more than 10 years, Mike Oechsli.

**Q:** You've been the ICA's Installation and Facilities Manager for more than 10 years, how many shows do you think you've installed? Do you have a few examples of your most memorable installations?

**A:** I started as the assistant preparator at the ICA in 2005 when it was down the street at the 465 S. 1st Street location. Since then, **I've installed more than 118 exhibitions at the ICA.** Wow. It's a little shocking to see that number.

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I've worked with so many inspiring artists that I always find it difficult to pick favorites. Sometimes the most memorable installations are the ones that were the most difficult...

I will always remember 2007-2009 since it was my first two years as Installation and Facilities Manager. I made so many (minor!) mistakes and learned so much in the process. Lewis DeSoto's installation was especially challenging at the time. I had the roof fly off of a rental truck when we were returning artwork and going to pick up his show. Of course it was raining, too. We didn't get to Lewis's studio until dark thirty and then drove back from San Raphael in a monsoon. Everything ended up being fine - the art was safe. The show was amazing, and so it was worth it. I was pretty scarred by the whole thing and refused to do art truck days for a year! We spent so much money on local art shipping companies that I eventually sucked it up and now do all the local art shipping projects. No roofs or wrecks have happened since.

Tony May was special because I really love and respect Tony as an artist and as one of my former professors at SJSU. The Chris Dorosz exhibit was incredible. Once again due to the intense labor and problem solving. Terry Berlier was really fun and challenging. I learned a lot from Terry about art installation and about art making. Very talented and smart people.

Finally, (since I could go on forever) this current round of shows are some of the best we've ever done at the ICA. There's no way we could have done these shows even a couple years ago. There would have been a lot of long nights and stressed out artists. All of the *Prinstallations* artists delivered some amazing work. Chris Eckert (our current exhibition *Privacy Not Included*) absolutely blew my mind and pushed me to new limits of what we can accomplish here. And **finally**, we got to do the ICA Installer show.

Q: Describe the importance of your core install team. What makes this team especially "special?"

**A:** I've had a lot great people on the install team over the last 10+ years. They have all been or are artists, like myself. The logistics of tracking everyone's schedules

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down and somehow cramming all of that into the Off-Center Gallery to prepare for this exhibition made my head spin.

Damian, Cynthia, and Martie are all deeply involved in the SoFA arts district scene and also are current or very recently working on the ICA install team. Damian works as the Head Installer and designer at MACLA just a few doors down now. I started chatting with them about the exhibit about a year ago and we all seemed to be on the same page.

**Q:** How has being the ICA's full time Installations and Facilities Manager affected your own art practice?

**A:** I feel like I've had a paid MFA experience over the last 10 years. I learn something new from every artist I work with. I enjoy working with other artists so much that I don't promote myself much anymore. I keep an art making discipline and find joy and satisfaction in the shows that fall into my lap. Knowing what it takes to be a represented, professional artist is daunting to me. They are the hardest working people I've met. Working closely with Cathy and all of the great curators here has helped refine how to talk about art and my practice as well.

**Q:** I know the idea for this show has been developing for years. What made you think of the idea?

**A:** We wanted to do a show that was about being an art installer. The memories, the process, the materials. We didn't want to do a show that was just art installers and "here is the art they do in their free time." I've been in shows with this concept, and while it was an honor to be in them (especially since I don't exhibit much) the end result always felt a little disjointed due to the artwork not having conceptual connections.

There were a lot of discussions with each other and with the ICA's Curatorial team to really refine what we wanted to do. That was helpful since it can be easy to go "off the rails" with crazy ideas. There was also a dark period where some of the conceptual themes we were playing with were dangerously similar to the *Detritus* exhibit last year. It was a really fun inventive project featuring close to 100 artists. *Detritus* featured the leftovers from art making. Installing a bunch of what most consider garbage and making it beautiful was challenging, but very

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successful. Once we finished that show, we had to constantly check ourselves not to make *Detritus* part 2. I think it helped us in the end.

The first idea I had was to do a guerrilla print residency at the ICA. I wanted to call it "After Hours" because they would all be made when the ICA was closed. I was able to keep that idea in the exhibit and got Cynthia to join in quite a few sessions which resulted in her great etchings. Damian would come by every now and then and it would turn into more of a collaborative discussion about what we were trying to accomplish. Martie came onto the team after we had already been planning the show for a while, but the art she was working on fit exactly the theme of the exhibit! It was a really bizarre coincidence while also reassuring since it felt like we were on to something.

**Q:** What was it like getting to create artwork for your own exhibition AT WORK? Especially since you've worked with countless artists in that same space in the past?

**A:** To be honest, I've made quite a few pieces of art at the ICA from ICA materials already. They've been in auctions and monotype marathons over the years. I have an obsession with making art out of what is around me. It imbues it with a special energy somehow.

**Q:** Describe one of your pieces in the show. Did you make it during the ICA residency?

**A:** When I tell people that the paper for "After Hours" monotypes are made from the palm trees, it always gets a reaction. I spent a lot of sessions waiting for paper to dry and experimenting with the material. I've never printed on palm frond paper so it was an adventure. I made a lot of bad ones, a lot of okay ones, and settled on this suite of 24.

It loosely fits into a 24 hour clock format from morning to day job to rush hour to night time to morning. Being a new parent and working here turns every day into 24 hour cycles rather than Monday or Tuesday. Most of my work has a landscape feel to it. I spend a lot of time driving up and down Northern California picking up art or visiting family in Shasta County, Humboldt County and all over the bay.

I've been trying to visualize the view in my periphery of the rolling hills and transitions from city to city and from microclimate to new microclimate. Most of CA is golden brown grass so I liked the color of the palm paper as a backdrop for the monotypes.





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