

ART & EXHIBITS

### Alison Gass named new director at San José Institute of Contemporary Art

Charles Desmarais | May 29, 2020 Updated: May 29, 2020, 11:56 am



Alison Gass is the newly appointed director and chief curator at San José Institute of Contemporary Art  
Photo: San José Institute of Contemporary Art

Alison Gass, a Bay Area transplant who parlayed curatorial positions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Stanford's Cantor Arts Center and elsewhere into the top museum job at the University of Chicago, is coming home.

Gass is set to take over as director and chief curator at the San José Institute of Contemporary Art beginning July 1, the SJICA board is expected to announce Monday, June 1. Gass joins the SJICA as it prepares to celebrate its 40th anniversary this fall. She replaces 20-year veteran director Cathy Kimball.

In an exclusive interview with The Chronicle, Gass expressed excitement about returning to the San Francisco Peninsula at a time that has seen innovative leadership and strong programs at the two Stanford museums — the Cantor and the Anderson Collection — and at the San José Museum of Art. "It feels like the institute is part of a great constellation of exciting museums," she said.

Gass had a short but productive tenure as director of the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art. She secured several major gifts and launched a curatorial fellowship to encourage diversity. After little more than two years, however, "it ultimately became clear that the university and I had different ideas about where we should be going," she said. She left the Smart in October.

"Ali is a widely renowned leader in the field of contemporary art and museums," Gordon Yamata, chair of the institute's board of trustees, said in a statement. "We were impressed by her demonstrated commitment to offering opportunities for artists to create immersive and site-specific work, which is a real hallmark of the SJICA's program."

SJICA is a smaller institution than the Chicago museum, with an annual budget, at about \$15 million, less than half the size. The SJICA staff will top out at nine, once Gass fills two open positions; the Smart has a staff of 20.

But the new director is pleased to focus exclusively on contemporary art and artists without the costs and complications of maintaining a collection.

Gass, 44, first moved to the Bay Area in 2006. When she returns with her husband, Alec Hathaway, they plan to live with their two children in Potrero Hill. She will also be near her parents and a brother, who now live in the region.

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