

DISPATCH ART



Ebony G. Patterson, "when the land is in plumage...a peacock is in molting" (2020)

CREATIVITY & COURAGE

Ali Gass, director of ICA San José (icasanjose.org), shares what inspired her career, her virtual day-to-day and what she hopes the community will take away from a visit.

BY ELLA CHAKARIAN

What does a day in your life as director of the Institute of Contemporary Art San José look like? These days, my life remains tied to Zoom. I spend most mornings doing a virtual all-staff check-in and our regular staff standing meetings. We have an incredibly dedicated team, and everyone is doing such a

great job of adapting to the changing circumstances both on- and offline. It has been a year of tremendous growth for us as individuals and collectively. We have limited the number of staff physically on-site out of an abundance of caution and safety. Our visitor and facilities services ensure the experience of our visitors—as they

slowly reenter our space—remains best in class and addresses ongoing health concerns. I am often looking ahead with our curator—Christine Koppes—conducting virtual studio visits with artists who have caught our eye or performing outreach and developing our amazing membership and board members. The job of the director is to define the artistic vision of the museum but also to help support the staff that ensures we create an inclusive, engaging and important program while also working within our operational parameters.

What is the most exciting part of working at the ICA San José? The

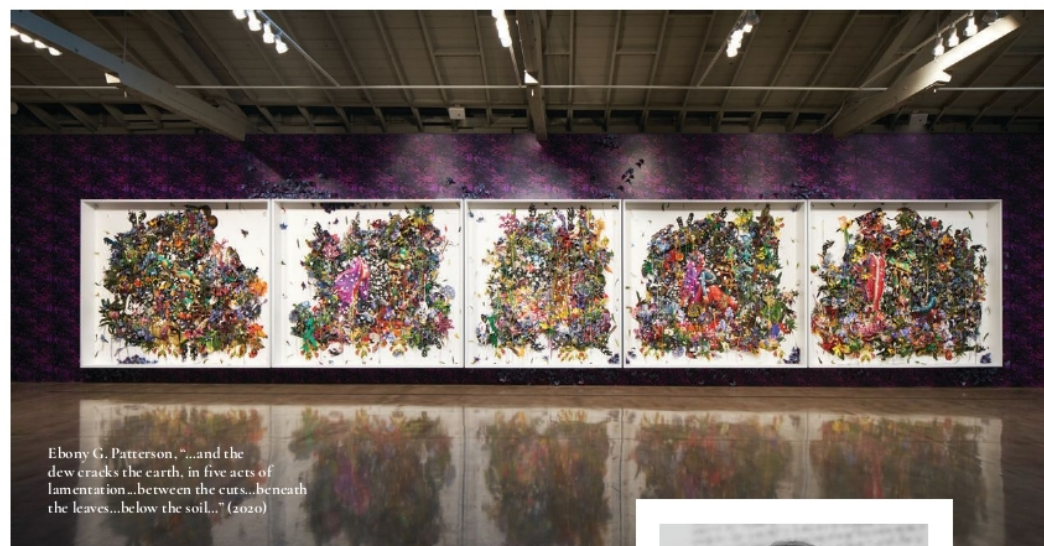
most exciting part of leading a small, noncollecting arts institution is that we can meaningfully demonstrate how contemporary art can help us navigate and better understand the world around us. I have had such a rewarding career working at larger institutions with great collections, but there is something very special to me about working directly with artists to make their exhibition dreams materialize. Our staff is mighty and nimble, and the pandemic highlighted our unmatched ability to think creatively and change direction quickly if we need to in response to major world events. For example, during COVID we were able to quickly turn our

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMPART PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHIE GALLERY, CHICAGO. INSTALLATION VIEW, ICA SAN JOSÉ

attention to the exterior facade of the building, convert the museum into a vote center and commission artist Amir H. Fallah to create a mural installation outside, so all could still experience art even though museums were shuttered. Likewise, this year felt more important than ever to generate opportunities for BIPOC artists working at the highest levels of artistic practices. We were able to change course, raise the financial support and partner with artists we were so excited to share with the Bay Area arts community.

Was there any moment or culmination of experiences in particular that inspired you to pursue this path? I always say that a particular class I took early in college called Women in Visual Culinary in 19th Century Paris was the spark for my career. This class looked at how the politics of gender in the face of modernism and the industrial revolution created specific experiences for women and ideals for that gender. I was fascinated with how artists captured the changing world around them and also how I could learn feminist history from art history. It sparked a deep curiosity about the possibility of a curatorial career and working with artists that I thought would help people think more deeply about the social, political and cultural world around them. I like to think that the artists I work with will be part of the new and changing canon of art history in the future. I hope someday students in art history class will learn about the 2020 election or the Black Lives Matter movement and the evolution of great formal art practices by looking at some of the artists we showed this year at the ICA.

What have been some of the most memorable initiatives since your time at the museum? I'm incredibly proud of our 2020-21 facade project



Ebony G. Patterson, "...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation...between the cuts...beneath the leaves...below the soil..." (2020)

"I REALLY HOPE PEOPLE WILL FEEL THAT THEY ARE WELCOME AT THE ICA."

—ALI GASS

with Amir H. Fallah, where we turned the museum into a vote center and partnered with the downtown association of San Jose to blanket downtown with artist-designed banners encouraging people to vote like their lives depend upon it. In the face of unimaginable challenges, the team at the ICA worked tirelessly to provide support, ideas and community as best as we could.

What is the significance of contemporary art in terms of how it reflects the world around us? Artists live and work in the same world we do. Since the beginning of artistic practice, they have had the ability to point to problems in the world or even solutions. It is, of course, a



From left: Ebony G. Patterson, "...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/bare witness" (detail) (2018); Ali Gass.

great way to learn global history (to study the art of different places in different times) and, likewise, it is a great way to think about the world we live in from the perspective of others. While of course art can be about the pleasure of looking, it can, I think most importantly, also help us navigate the world we live in today as we consider global conditions through the artists' voices.

How do you hope viewers will feel after visiting ICA San Jose? What conversation do you hope ICA San Jose will generate among the public? I really hope people will feel that they

are welcome at the ICA. We are a free museum, which is so important. Sometimes I think that if you didn't grow up going to museums or seeing contemporary art, there is a sense that it is elitist or 'not for me.' I really want to dismantle that psychological barrier, and I hope our exhibitions program will be changing enough that over time anyone who visits us will see aspects of their own life or histories reflected on the walls around them. I so much want people to feel comfortable asking questions, getting inspired and realizing that contemporary art is truly for everyone! ▢