



Q&A With ICA San José Director Ali Gass

By Ella Chakarian | June 29, 2021 | [Lifestyle](#)

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





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

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 facilities services ensure the experience of our visitors—as they slowly reenter our spa





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.



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

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 contemporary art can help us navigate and better understand the world around us. I f





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 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 Cutlery 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.





Ebony G. Patterson, "...they wondered what to do...for those who bear/ bare witness" (detail) (2018)

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 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.





Ali Gass

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 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.

