

Conversation with
LAUREN SCHELL
DICKENS, San José
Museum of Art

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

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San José Museum of Art

Lauren Schell Dickens is currently Senior Curator at the San José Museum of Art, California; at the time of this interview, her title was Curator.

With Laurel McLaughlin

LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

What is your title here at the San José Museum of Art (SJMA) and how long have you worked at the organization?

LAUREN SCHELL DICKENS:

My title is Curator, and I've been here three years.

LM:

How large is the institution? How many employees work here, and how many are on the curatorial team?

LSD:

We're about 40 full-time staff and there are three people on the curatorial team: It's me as Curator, our Associate Curator, Rory Padeken, and our Curatorial Associate, Kathryn Wade.*

LM:

Do you all curate exhibitions?

LSD:

We all curate shows. We have around 14,000 square feet of exhibition space, which keeps us very busy

LM:

Does SJMA have a collection?

*Since the time of this interview, Rory Padeken has been promoted to Curator and Kathryn Wade has been promoted to Assistant Curator.

LSD:

We do. Our collection is small in institutional terms—I come from a much larger institutional background—but we have about 2,500 objects and growing.

LM:

Do you primarily collect contemporary art?

LSD:

We've had a recent shift in our collection plan, which now focuses on contemporary art. Our collection actually goes back to the 1920s, but there are more holes in it than not, so we have to be strategic in how we can use our collection to tell a coherent story.

LM:

You mentioned that you've worked in larger institutions. Can you tell me more about that?

LSD:

I came here from the National Gallery in Washington D.C. The curatorial team there was 35 full-time curators, plus curatorial assistants, and all of the department assistants. And before that, I was at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, where we had seven or eight full-time curators.

LM:

What was that shift like coming into a smaller institution? I'm sure you wear many different hats here.

LSD:

One of the benefits of working at a small institution like this is that you have a lot more freedom to impact the program and schedule and to choose the kinds of projects that you want to do. At the National Gallery, you work on one project at a time, for a four or five-year period. Here, I open four or five shows per year, which is quite a lot. It keeps us very contemporary and very responsive, but it might not be sustainable though.

LM:

Many of our other interviewees have said the same thing—that

they're rethinking how many shows they produce a year in order to have ample time to consider lead time and research.

LSD:

There's benefit in keeping our shows on view for longer in terms of access. Traffic in the Bay Area is terrible. I hear from people in San Francisco all the time that they intended to come to a show but in a three-month run during a busy period, they maybe couldn't make it. So, we're trying to extend our exhibitions, which helps both with longevity of the curatorial team and to enable the shows to be seen by wider audiences.

LM:

That's great. I know that this building is a former library and post office. Can you tell me a bit about this institutional history?

LSD:

It was the first post office in San José, and then it became the library.

LM:

How did it then shift to a museum?

LSD:

The library outgrew the building and moved to a new building. The main library is now a few blocks over by San José State University. The museum was founded by artists and faculty associated with San José State in 1969. The idea was that the artists teaching there wanted somewhere to show their work, and this old library building was sitting empty.

LM:

Your anniversary seems to dovetail with ICA's introspection for this project. Are you all having these conversations about institutionality and perhaps rethinking strategic plans?

LSD:

Very much so. And we're also a new team. Our director, Susan Sayre Batton, came on just before I started, and Kathryn Wade came on after me, so this team has only been here for three years. Previously, the institution's program was very regional. California Regionalism was a very strong aesthetic brand at the time too, so they were really thinking in terms of dialogues within the state. There are a lot of familiar figures in our collection from the Bay Area Figuration movement and California Funk.

But San José has changed drastically and quickly. Some percentage of the population grew up here when there were only 50,000 people and cherry orchards, and they still think of San José as a farming community. My dad grew up here, and a lot of those people still live here. Another large part of the population immigrated here in one way or another. San José is a majority-minority city—so lots of immigrants. We have the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam, lots of South Asians, Mexicans, and folks from El Salvador and the Philippines working in tech and agriculture. It's a really diverse area. We started rethinking the term "regionalism" and considering how to address a plurality of communities and international dialogues within our one city.

LM:

That's such a helpful overview of the cityscape of San José and the context in which you're operating. I have a question about audience, but first, I'm curious about what you said concerning the founding of the museum as a place to show work by folks at the San José State University.

LSD:

It might not have been a state university at the time, but yes, that institution.

LM:

When and how did that shift in governance from an artist-led initiative to a curatorial initiative occur?

LSD:

I think that was pretty fluid. San José was a small town, so there really wasn't much distinction between who might be an artist and who might be a curator.

LM:

But it sounds like it wasn't a kind of institutional takeover, as we might think of it today.

LSD:

No, and we're still a very local-run institution. The majority of our board members live within 15 miles of here. We don't have one of those boards who have people living in New York.

LM:

That was apparent last night at the Rina Banerjee opening—that people knew one another very well.

LSD:

It's very nice, but it's also challenging. How do you build a community where everyone feels welcome and familiar, but also be open to new folks who might not see people who look like them?

LM:

Who do you see as your audience, and do you consider that group to be the same as your community? These are important critical terms that many museums are thinking about, so we're curious about SJMA's perspective.

LSD:

I think every person that you ask in this institution would define that differently. And because we're all different individuals with different communities where we feel like we belong, everyone is reaching towards their community, which I think is a very human condition.

One of the shifts that we're thinking about is how we can diversify our exhibition program with different shows that are meant to appeal to different communities. In some ways, it makes us seem schizophrenic as an institution,

but that also reflects the nature of the city where we are. In Silicon Valley, you have all the people who work in tech industry, but the Bay Area is also a hotbed of political activism, the birthplace of ethnic studies, and home to many immigrant groups. I can't tell you how many conference meetings we've had where someone is trying to figure out one show where the interests of all of these different communities overlap. I don't think there needs to be one show that does that.

LM:

You mentioned the tech audience, and since San José is the economic capital of Silicon Valley, how does SJMA acknowledge and work with that community? Are there certain pressures that come with working with that community in particular?

LSD:

Whenever you talk about the tech community people say, "Oh, well we'll do something with VR and cutting-edge technologies." But in my view, someone who is working with that technology daily doesn't want to go and see an artist working with the same materials and ideas, in a possibly less sophisticated way. I'd say that something around coding or systems thinking would, I think, appeal to a tech audience. But that's not as obvious a connection for donors. There are all these ways that people connect to material. Cutting-edge technology can easily not be cutting-edge anymore, so there has to be something else to draw them in.

LM:

And there are many topics they're interested in, as I heard from some of them last night—so many of them wanted to see the Rina Banerjee exhibition!

LSD:

There's this huge history of textiles and craft in California as well, and I think there's this really interesting synergy between coding, systems thinking, and craft. That might be a show in ten years.

LM:

That sounds fascinating. With so many communities and topics in mind, what does a season here look like? I've gotten to see the shows here currently, which are *Undersoul: Jay DeFeo; Catherine Wagner: Paradox Observed; Screen Acts: Women in Film and Video; and the exhibition, Rina Banerjee: Make Me a Summary of the World*, co-organized with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) and Jodi Throckmorton. And then there were the exhibitions I sadly missed, *Dinh Q. Lê: True Journey is Return* and The Propeller Group. How do you select particular shows, whether solo, mid-career, or collaborations, and is there a "typical" SJMA show?

LSD:

We try for balance. It's a constant negotiation between group and solo exhibitions and thematically familiar and unknown solo exhibitions. We work with both emerging and established artists, but we're not in a city where the reputation of an artist is going to draw a crowd, so we tend towards shows that resonate thematically, while also introducing fantastic artists.

We're also striving for sustained community engagement, so I don't want to do one-offs. We have been working with the Vietnamese community here, which as I mentioned is one of the largest communities of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam, and traditionally not a museum-going population. In advance of The Propeller Group exhibition, we had meetings off-site with leaders in the Vietnamese community, who have no relationship to the museum, to talk about what they would like to see in the institution, how the institution could play a role in their community, and whether that was even of interest.

Those conversations were not always easy. The Propeller Group's work is really geared towards international audiences outside of Vietnam, so the topic of how refugees from South Vietnam feel about artists living in Vietnam today is really complicated. But it began a relationship that we wanted to deepen, so we followed with an exhibition of Dinh Q. Lê's work, simultaneous with a

bunch of educational off-site initiatives and programs. Our education team went to different Vietnamese festivals that happen every year around town, and they went to the Vietnamese community center and library. The really important thing was that we were going out of our space. The museum is an institution and there are a lot of people who don't feel welcome here.

LM:

I'd love to hear a bit more about your collaborative working method. I know you've worked with KADIST, and now PAFA for this co-organized exhibition, so do you have a strategic plan for who you work with?

LSD:

Strategic? Opportunistic, perhaps. Collaboration helps us spread our resources. The logic of working with Jodi on Rina's show was that we can only do so much and I can only do so much. It helps us to share our projects so that more people can experience them, but it also just helps with the lift and the labor. When we're working with so many different kinds of communities, everyone has their different audiences, or their different roots, or the different groups that they naturally have affinities with. You get to know people through those networks.

LM:

That makes sense. Circling back to accessibility, how is SJMA thinking about that? Language is a key component to that work. Are all of the wall texts and the exhibition catalogues translated?

LSD:

Not the catalogues, but all of the wall texts for the exhibitions are available in the three official languages of San José: English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

LM:

And are they available online or in the exhibition space?

LSD:

They're in the exhibition—I don't know if you saw it—but there's a little pocket with a book that you can take out and walk around with all of the translations.

LM:

That's a huge feat and it requires so much labor.

LSD:

Yes, and you have to have your labels written much earlier!

LM:

Are there other ways that you're thinking about accessibility as an institution?

LSD:

Our open hours are something that we keep coming back to. We're open from 11am to 5pm, Tuesday through Sunday, which are work hours for a lot of people. We had one late night on the third Thursday of every month, which is not a fixed date, so it was hard for people to figure out when that might be. We've just partnered with Facebook, asking the company to give back to their community by helping us stay open longer, and now we're open on the first Friday each month until 9pm for free.

LM:

That's incredible.

LSD:

It's great. We're getting a thousand people a night sometimes, so there's a real desire for the late hours. And at the same time we received another grant to be free for all youth, students, and educators with ID.

LM:

Thank you for bringing us to the financial side of the institution's operations because that leads into my next question—are the exhibitions here ticketed?

LSD:

Yes.

LM:

I'm curious because you mentioned the grant structures, and you reached out to companies like Facebook in Silicon Valley, so how does funding work here?

LSD:

I guess like most institutions, we're always fundraising and pulling off great projects with limited resources. Honestly, the late-night access is something I've been pushing because it bothered me personally that people who I wanted to visit the museum could never make it here during the day. So, I had the opportunity to solicit Facebook through a contact, and you know, that's how things get started.

LM:

That's huge. And then I'm curious, what is your overall operating budget?

LSD:

It's about \$5 million.

LM:

Thank you, that gives us a sense of scale. I was speaking to some of the trustees last night and they mentioned that the local government funds SJMA.

LSD:

The city government supports the building—HVAC and building upkeep—and we receive a significant annual grant from the Office of Cultural Affairs to support programs.

LM:

Is your board a giving board or an advisory one? How do they operate?

LSD:

They're a financial board.

LM:

And they give regularly?

LSD:

They do.

LM:

Do they also advise in terms of what shows are selected?

LSD:

I'm sure they have suggestions, but not in a way that reaches me directly.

LM:

Do you have autonomy as a curator to select the exhibitions?

LSD:

For the most part yes, though all final decisions are made collaboratively with the other curators and our director. But we're very supportive of each other, and unlike other places where I've worked, there isn't competition between us, so there's a lot more room to experiment. It's nice, because we're a smaller institution and in many ways, we're off the radar. We can really try things that may fail and that's fine, which is something I enjoy.

LM:

And for the others on the curatorial team, do you also work together to determine their shows—is it a collaborative process?

LSD:

We have meetings where we talk about what kinds of shows would be good, or who we'd like to work with. We also think about which artist might resonate at a particular time and why that might be advantageous. Then we hash it out amongst ourselves. Things change, budgets shift. We just had to bump a Hito Steyerl installation from our calendar for next year because we couldn't make the budget work, which has a cascading effect.

LM:

Was that a commissioned work?

LSD:

It's actually a collection work. We acquired *Factory of the Sun*, 2015.

LM:

Wow, that's fantastic—I've seen it about three times now, and it's more impressive and ambitious every time.

LSD:

We co-acquired it with MCA Chicago and the Hammer, which was a great opportunity for our small institution to add a great piece to the collection that we otherwise could not afford.

LM:

That's interesting. I asked about commissions because you mentioned the different scales of projects—such as the Catherine Wagner residency that led to the current exhibition. Do you pay artists at SJMA?

LSD:

Yes, we try to pay artists for everything. Unfortunately, that's come under discussion for next year's budgets. But we pay artists for speaking or performing, and we try to do loan fees—we try. We always give support for a commission, separate from materials.

LM:

Is W.A.G.E.-certification important here in Northern California?

LSD:

It's very important in California. I think the numbers are off though. We were just talking about this the other day, because for a performance commission, it's something like \$3,000, but for an artist fee, it's much more than that, which, to me makes absolutely no sense.

LM:

That seems like a disparity in value.

LSD:

Yes, there's a value hierarchy that is outdated. I just did a performance commission with Brendan Fernandes and I was trying to justify the commissioning fee, but then someone points to W.A.G.E. and says "Oh, no, it should be down there." But we should think of it as an artwork, not necessarily a performance, even though it is.

LM:

That's an interesting question in terms of "collecting"—do you commission many performances? I know you had Lara Schnitger's work that included a public procession at SJMA earlier last year. And the Bay Area, of course, has a rich history in performance work, so I was curious if that's part of your curatorial agenda?

LSD:

Yes, that was Lara's *Suffragette City*. I would love to work more with performance. I come from a theatrical background, so event-based work is something that I really enjoy. The heavy lift here is that we don't have a separate public programs department who works with artists—our education department runs the lectures series—so that all comes from the curators.

LM:

Wow. Do you have an education department and would they assist with that kind of programming?

LSD:

Our education department is fantastic but they mainly work with kids and youth, as you might've seen upstairs. The educators go out into all the schools because there's very limited arts education in the county, and they run tours and activities for something like 45,000 students throughout the county

LM:

It sounds like that is direly needed. Seeing as you're the sole collecting art institution in the South Bay, I'm curious about the

local ecology here. It seems as if the cultural community local ecology in San José is shifting, as there have been some closures with the ballet and the symphony. We're curious how you see SJMA fitting into the conversation—this can be programmatically or conceptually, national or international.

LSD:

San José is difficult because it's such an expensive area to live in. There are a handful of artists at best, and almost no commercial galleries, and a very limited number of art spaces. Traffic is terrible around the Bay, so it's hard to get down here from Oakland and San Francisco. I'm always looking for another institution which might be similar to us. I haven't really found any so far.

LM:

Your website mentions that the museum grew out of a kind of 1960s "flower-power" activism, which made me think about the ecology of institutions in the Bay Area and their histories of political activism. And your mission states that the Museum "reflects the diverse cultures and the spirit of Silicon Valley." You mentioned reaching out to communities in previous projects and it seems like that's part of your curatorial ethos, and I'd love to know if there are other initiatives that the museum is involved with?

LSD:

The next project I'm working on is with Glenn Kaino and Tommie Smith, the 1968 Olympian who raised his fist in a silent gesture of protest from the medal podium. Tommie Smith was a San José State runner at the time, so it has a very local resonance and history. There's a statue of Tommie Smith four

blocks over at San José State and many students walking by don't know who he is. They recognize it vaguely as some historic civil rights gesture. Glenn has been working with Tommie on a series of sculptures and prints around how that gesture continues to resonate today. They came and did a Drawing Rally, which involved kids from a local community college and high school who drew these famous images of Tommie in the 1960s while Glenn and Tommie spoke about the importance of individual activism and making a difference with whatever platform you have. Tommie talks a lot about "passing the baton," and we're really drawing on the relay metaphor to build a series of workshops in which community is teaching community. There isn't a particular issue that we're pushing forward, but rather prompting individuals to be involved and take action. So, LGBTQ advocacy is one of the workshops, and there's one about ICE, and immigrant raids. There's also a feminist banner-making workshop, so all different sorts of things.

LM:

It sounds like this will also be an important program for the youth in the community, seeing as they're not necessarily given access to rigorous art education.

Looking externally a bit more in relation to community, your website also mentions that the SJMA's mission connects San José to the rest of the world. I'm curious about San José as a specific locale, and I know there's some exchange with San Francisco, traffic depending.

LSD:

From my own perspective, and I don't know that this necessarily reflects that of the institution, San José is such an international city that is in many ways more in dialogue with Delhi and Hong Kong and Manila than with San Francisco. To think about California Regionalism is to engage diasporic identity, agricultural histories, and of course tech. Many San José residents are more connected to their home countries and other parts of the U.S. than they are so San Francisco.

LM:

In thinking about how names reflect the local or broader

communities that organizations serve, I noticed that SJMA is now using the diacritical accent on the “e”—and I was wondering if that’s a kind of reclamation of the Hispanic heritage here? The city officially accepted the diacritical mark in 1979, but doesn’t always use it, so I was curious about the museum’s position.

LSD:

We follow the lead of the City of San José, which officially uses the accent in written text, although there are some exceptions for logos and other designed elements.

LM:

On that topic of language, we’ve mentioned throughout the conversation the word “institution,” which for ICA is in the title, but does SJMA think of itself as an institution and if so, in what sense?

LSD:

We are an institution—we have a collection and we’re custodians of the collection and we’re responsible for maintaining those objects. We function very differently from a non-collecting ICA, for instance. But as the only major arts organization in the area, we also think of ourselves as an anchor institution, playing a critical role in helping define the city and its identity, and really functioning as a community gathering place that reflects the people who live here. This role seems particularly important right now with the city undergoing so much transformation.

LM:

ICA has been thinking about the institution as constituted by the people within it, so if you are reaching out on a relational level, it creates a different expansion of what an institution can be.

LSD:

So when staff are here for a finite period of time and the institution supposedly outlasts any individual, its face changes over time?

LM:

Exactly. That's maybe why these events or workshops engaging different communities are so crucial, because you're meeting them where they are, rather than expecting them to find meaning in this perpetual institution that's somehow separate from their everyday lives. It seems like there have to be different approaches to timing and mobility in order to reach these particular communities.

LSD:

And smaller institutions are so shaped by the personality of the director and the director's way of being in community. That is definitely true of this institution over its history. The face of it has changed quite a bit with each director.

LM:

And perhaps with each curator too? It sounds like you have a lot of autonomy over your exhibitions.

LSD:

We do, though of course it's all done in conversation with our director. And I think ultimately, when you get beyond those art people who know what the job of a curator is, when you get out into the broader community, it's the director who is the figurehead.

LM:

Yes, perhaps. We've covered a lot, and I've gotten to hear about a lot of the upcoming exhibitions and initiatives that you're spearheading. I'm curious if you'd

be able to share some of the challenges or frustrations that you've had or perhaps things that, looking back, you might approach differently?

LSD:

We're small, which for sure has benefits but can also be challenging. We were writing our strategic plan a couple of years ago and someone asked me to describe what we do and the benefit of being here, and I said, "Any project you dream up you can do, but you just have to do it yourself." To be fair, at that moment, I was working with The Propeller Group on a permanent public mural. I'd never done something outdoors and permanent on city property, so I was suddenly wading into meetings at city hall to get approval, getting permits to bring tractors into parks, and all sorts of things.

Energy is a huge limiting factor, in some ways more so than money. There are plenty of fantastic projects that really engage people that don't cost a lot of money if you have the energy to collaborate and do a lot yourself. For the mural we also did a Kickstarter campaign. Again, anything that you want to do, you can do if you throw yourself into it. It's the non-profit mentality, and I hear artists get frustrated by it all the time. We all get burnt out by this, but it's how the industry runs. There has to be a passion behind it, or it's just not going to work.

LM:

Sure. But as you've explained, there's so much unseen labor that occurs, which is a sobering thought, and something that's begun to be addressed in recent criticism, I think.

We don't like to end these conversations on frustrations and leave it that, because then we'd be giving into the pressures that divert us from the passion. What are you excited about coming up, whether exhibitions or curatorial visions for the future?

LSD:

This is not the day for that question. Rina Banerjee's retrospective is one of the largest projects I've ever worked on. I'm taking Friday off and I'm very excited about it!

LM:

You deserve it after a big exhibition opening!

LSD:

One thing I'm excited about is the launch of our new Contemporary Curator's Circle. I've mentioned the demographics and the way that audiences mix here, and one of the things that I've noticed is that I don't really have peers—people in their 30s or 40s who are interested in art and new to the area—in our current audiences. The Circle is about getting together a group of collectors, aspiring collectors, artists, and interested folk in the South Bay—again, where there aren't that many institutions—to do studio visits, see exhibitions, have cocktails, and to socialize together. It helps the institution because it's a donor group, but for me, it's really about building community and making friends! San José is where I am, where I live, and I want to connect to people through the museum. It's something that I've been thinking about since I got here. It's hard to launch a group, but I'm excited about it.
