

Two galleries get new spaces in San Jose

MOVES BOLSTER DOWNTOWN'S SOUTH FIRST STREET DISTRICT

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Tony May arrived in San Jose in 1967, hired to teach art at San Jose State. But as he looked around for a local art scene - museum, galleries, dedicated patrons - what he saw was a blank canvas.

"Everything was happening in San Francisco," he recalls. "San Jose was pretty much completely devoid of anything that resembled a contemporary art venue."

Oh, how things have changed in 40 years. Now, San Jose can boast of a well-respected art museum and several galleries along with two time-tested contemporary art organizations - both of which soon will be in new locations in a downtown neighborhood with growing artistic synergy.

Moving days

The first, Works/San Jose, has moved to a spot in the 400 block of South First Street that the other, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, left in January. Friday, the institute will reopen in a renovated building at 560 S. First, just a minute's walk away. A lineup of other places to see art - the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA), Anno Domini and the Green Rice Gallery - starts just two doors down from the institute.

Works' new home is a lot smaller than its former space on Third Street, but it's hoping to make up for that by being closer to all the action.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, meanwhile, will have twice as much gallery space for its shows, which have been drawing more and more national attention. That means it will be able to expand its exhibition schedule. And its new home will have the kind of precise climate control to reassure museums and collectors about loaning their holdings.

At night, passersby will find it hard to ignore the 10-by-10-foot windows in the institute's new front wall. A series of works will be placed there as part of a program called "Night Moves" that makes "us a 24/7 organization," says executive director Cathy Kimball. The window galleries reach "out to an audience that might not have a clue about what we do inside and might be interested in what's beaming out."

The building also includes a reading room with shelves that will be full of exhibition catalogs and art books as well as digital-format resources on art for artists and the general public. But Kimball is proudest of a print room to be outfitted with everything needed to support workshops and artist residencies - the kind of facility that is rare outside of university art departments.

The reading room and the print room are spaces Kimball, the institute's chief since 2000, has wanted for years. "When I first came to ICA, 'institute' was the one word I had a problem with and that I really have been working toward justifying," she says.

Making the new building happen took years of grant-writing and fundraising. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Arts Council of Silicon Valley and the city of San Jose, plus institute member contributions, bankrolled the purchase of the building and its renovations.

Fundraising progress

The institute has raised more than half of the \$4 million it borrowed for the project. "We have grown to a point," Kimball says, "where we feel confident about our fiscal future."

Works' finances definitely have been of the shoestring variety; the organization has been kept afloat by members' dues, contributions from supporters, fundraisers and grants.

It has been pushed out from one location to another by downtown redevelopment and valley economics; in the 30 years since it was started as a collaborative by May and other artists, it has had five homes. That it has survived that long, May says, is "interesting and wonderful and mysterious."

Works has responded to the moves with the kind of flexibility one might expect from an "alternative" organization founded to host all kinds of art. "We accept the term 'artist' in its broadest definition," says Erin Cizan, who recently became Works' first paid director, "and embrace all at any stage of development."

"I think of Works as a think tank for people really involved in the cutting edge of fine arts education," says Kathryn Dunlevie, a photographic collage artist on the boards of both Works and the Institute of Contemporary Art. "They're very much the first line, very much open to new ideas. They take risks." Works' shows, she says, can be raw and experimental.

Works celebrated its opening on South First Street in April by inviting anyone to bring, or to create on site, a 16-by-16-inch square depicting in some way a head and shoulders, a torso or the areas of the body from hip to knee or from knee to feet. Each square will be placed alongside others to create life size forms and the final assembled collaboration, "Community Mosaic," will be auctioned off on eBay.

Over the years, many artists, with and without degrees, have warmed to Works' support, forming an artistic community. After each move, these artists and other volunteers have pitched in like veteran construction workers to put up sheetrock, lay plumbing and rewire electrical systems. Architects and designers did pro bono work.

The new Works is just the half the size of its old space, but the South First Street art cluster presents possibilities for coordinated efforts among the various spaces - "a real partnership and a sense of support," Cizan says. "There is enormous crossover and friendship."

For J. Michael Bewley, an attorney in San Jose who collects contemporary art, the gathering of art venues on South First makes the street more of a destination point and is a very practical step toward making downtown a cultural hot spot. For years, he said, that's "always been just about to happen, just around the corner."

Now, San Jose's art venues finally seem to have gone beyond their first unsteady steps to achieve a steady forward motion. Bewley says that these days, when he goes to San Francisco to see art, "people in San Francisco are talking about what's going on in San Jose."

He is hoping the city will respond to the new opportunity by organizing the kind of art week he recently experienced in Chicago, where collectors and artists were treated to a staggering array of options, from curator-led tours of the Art Institute to free meals at participating restaurants.

Kimball, meanwhile, is glad to report that someone she met at a conference in New York recognized the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. But she doesn't want the institute to lose its way. "We have to be careful," she says. "We're not the museum." The institute's patrons don't want it "to get too big and become something other than what we are - an intimate, accessible and lively art center."

Works/San Jose

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Where: 451 S. First St., San Jose

Hours: Noon-4 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays; noon-7 p.m. Thursdays

Admission: Free

Information: (408)286-6800, www.workssanjose.org

San Jose Institute

of Contemporary Art

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Where: 560 S. First St., San Jose (opens Friday)

Opening weekend events: Friday: 5:30 to 7 p.m., a members-only preview; 7 to 9 p.m., exhibition and reception.
Saturday: 11 a.m., "Home Sweet Home," a panel discussion with local artists; noon-5 p.m., open house.

Regular hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays; noon-5 p.m. Saturdays

Admission: Free

Information: (408)283-8155, www.sjica.org

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