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"Making Their Mark: Works from the Shah Garg Collection," at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

NEW BAY AREA ART CURATORS EMPHASIZE COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN SHIFTING MUSEUM LANDSCAPE

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In the courtyard of a studio on the UC Berkeley campus, artist Gabriel Chaile and students in the school's Art Practice program combined clay, sawdust and glue in outsized plastic buckets to produce the adobe that is central to his practice. Scooping up handfuls of the reddish-brown material, they patted it onto six large-scale metal forms, which were later bolted together.

Their joint efforts contributed to the 15-foot-tall sculpture comprising Chaile's exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive that opened in December 2023. "It's such a special experience for students — seeing an artist working on an exhibition, getting to know him and seeing the work they created together on view," said Margot Norton, chief curator at BAMPFA.

Chaile's show was part of the first-ever residency the museum co-organized with the Art Practice program. During his one-month stay, the Argentine-born artist, who is based in Portugal, spoke to several classes and enlisted one class to help mix and apply the adobe.

Collaborations like this, between the museum and campus, are top of mind for Norton, 42, who joined BAMPFA in April 2023. Indeed, today's art institutions are no longer simply venues in which to view art. In a moment when they are trying to make their programming more relevant and attractive to local audiences, community engagement is increasingly factoring into the equation.

Prior to the pandemic, "there was a heavy concentration, not just here but around the country, on academic interests in high art," said Ralph Remington, director of cultural affairs for the San Francisco Arts Commission. "It wasn't necessarily connected to bringing people closer to the art. It almost kept people at a distance."

Now, he continued, “We’re looking at how people can connect with other people and discover or rediscover our own humanity.”

While Chaile’s exhibition was a uniquely hands-on example of this phenomenon, a new show at SFMOMA offers the public a playful opportunity to interact. “Get in the Game,” on view through February 18, includes “Stadium,” a 22-person foosball table by Maurizio Cattelan. The piece (and the sports-themed exhibition in general) certainly fits with SFMOMA’s focus on what it calls “radical hospitality,” which entails making the museum welcoming to a wider range of visitors.

At a number of Bay Area museums, efforts to boost relationships within the community are being steered by some relatively new faces. Norton was hired at the same time as two additional senior curators at BAMPFA, Anthony Graham and Victoria Sung. In August 2023, Makeda Best assumed the role of deputy director of curatorial affairs at the Oakland Museum of California. And this past April, Daisy Nam became the first female director and chief curator at the California College of the Arts’ Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art.

“Museums have been trying to rethink who they are, what they are doing, and (are) bringing in folks that have expertise and experience in different spaces,” said Carolina Aranibar-Fernández, director of galleries and public programs for the Arts Commission. “I think that’s why there’s a lot of new people ... to refresh the voices in the museums.

Prior to her arrival at BAMPFA, Norton spent 12 years at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in her native New York, where she also worked with Chaile. The New Museum’s 2021 Triennial, which Norton co-curated, included another monumental clay sculpture by the artist.

Chaile’s exhibition at BAMPFA — part of its Matrix Program for Contemporary Art that spotlights cutting-edge concepts — was his inaugural solo show in the United States. Norton envisions such campus collaborations happening more frequently, with announcements about future installments expected in the coming months.

The programming for “Making Their Mark: Works from the Shah Garg Collection,” featuring 70-plus women artists and on view at BAMPFA through April 20, includes various community events beyond tours and talks. For instance, after inspecting Howardena Pindell’s painting and Françoise Grossen’s textile work in the gallery, budding artists ages 6 to 12 are invited to conjure their own versions. Next spring, works made in response to “Making Their Mark” by Berkeley High School students will be exhibited at BAMPFA.

Across the bay in San Francisco, with CCA’s expansion this fall, the admission-free Wattis is now housed in the new Double Ground campus in the Design District, rather than half a mile away at a standalone site. (CCA, including its park-like green spaces and the Wattis, are open to the public.) The relocation — in keeping with the overarching vision for a single unified campus — has already led to organic engagement between the institute and the school, according to Nam.

“I’ve noticed that many visitors to the Wattis wander downstairs and see the studios, workshops and students in the process of making,” said Nam, describing this as “a new experience for our audiences.”

Likewise, she added, “I’ve also noticed that the campus audience — students, staff, faculty — visit the Wattis more regularly. Folks hang out in the Wattis gardens, where there are outdoor works on view, and then come in to see the shows. The Wattis feels more alive in that way.”

Nam, 40, who was previously the executive director and curator of Ballroom Marfa in Texas, is no stranger to forging connections within a community, including a campus environment: She was an assistant director at Harvard and Columbia universities. “Seeing a student learn about an artist or a technique through an exhibition or program is really special,” she said. “It can change the course of their [own] work. They are the future artists, makers, writers, thinkers of our time.”

In the short period that the Wattis has been integrated into the campus, a synergy has already emerged. Artist

Teresa Baker, whose work is featured in the current exhibition “All This Soft Wild Buzzing,” gave a talk to fine arts students. Tania Pérez Córdova, a future exhibiting artist, met with sculpture students. The Wattis is also in the early stages of developing limited-edition objects with Katherine Lam, chair of CCA’s furniture design program, and students in the program.

Best, 49, also comes from a university background, having arrived at the Oakland Museum from Harvard Art Museums. “I’m very used to the idea that you work for a community,” she said. “Before it was an academic community and now it’s for a broader community.” Specifically, Best is eager to bring to the fore OMCA’s own collections, which encompass 2 million items.

“In the art world, people always come to borrow pieces, but I want them to be showcased here,” she elaborated. “And I want people to be proud of what’s here.”

Among the museum’s historical artifacts that may be especially compelling for OMCA visitors: the Oakland Tribune’s photography archive and works made by Miné Okubo while she was incarcerated in Japanese American internment camps.

On Nov. 8, the museum opened “Born of the Bear Dance: Dugan Aguilar’s Photographs of Native California.” The exhibition highlights the Native photographer’s archive, which was gifted to OMCA by his family in 2022. The subjects of his powerful imagery range from landscapes to portraits to gatherings.

Joining OMCA was a Bay Area homecoming for Best, who grew up in San Francisco. The museum’s widely recognized “social cohesion” emphasis — which revolves around the idea of bringing people together and fostering a sense of connection — was among the draws for her.

By surveying visitors and tracking data to develop a feedback loop, the museum aims to better serve the community. For example, in 2019, 60% of respondents strongly agreed that they “appreciate that OMCA tells stories from different communities.” In 2023, the figure jumped to 75%.

In explaining the increase, Johanna Jones, the museum’s director of Evaluation and Visitor Insight, noted that 2019 was considered a baseline for its data. By 2023, with information it had gathered taken into account, OMCA had presented exhibitions like “Mothership: Voyage Into Afrofuturism,” “Hella Feminist,” and “Angela Davis — Seize the Time” — “all designed to promote social cohesion,” Jones said.

The impact extends to OMCA events, too. Take Thursday After Hours — which returns in January and is billed as a weekly night out for adults, with cocktails, culture and community — as well as annual celebrations such as Día de Los Muertos and Lunar New Year.

As museums continue to face financial and attendance challenges, outreach that translates to expanded and diverse audiences is key. “It’s forcing everyone to think about who’s coming in our doors, what are we producing, does it matter and how does it matter,” Best said.

“It’ll be interesting not only what kind of art we produce, but also how this period of reflection, soul-searching, reorganization and reprioritization changes our institutions. What kind of institutions are we going to have in 10 years? I think that they’re going to be even better.”