

MAKING MOVES

Jamillah James, the recently appointed curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, speaks with artist Sarah Cain about the museum's new iteration.

BY JORDAN RIEFE
PORTRAIT BY TRACEY LANDWORTH



Sarah Cain and Jamillah James in front of Cain's *Now I'm going to tell you everything*, the inaugural project for ICA's courtyard wall.

JAMILLAH JAMES HAS BEEN ON A ROCKET-LIKE trajectory over the past five years, from curatorial fellow at the Studio Museum in Harlem to a move across country as the assistant curator at the Hammer Museum. Now, as the head curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles' buzzy new location, James was a driving force in the inaugural programming for the museum's new 12,700 square-foot-space in the heart of the Arts District, designed by red-hot architect Kulapat Yantrasast.

One of James's first moves as a curator at ICA was to commission L.A.-based Sarah Cain to paint a strikingly colorful mural over the entrance, which will be activated by other artists several times a year. Just before ICA's opening, the two sat down to talk to LALA.

What made Sarah right for the main space outside?

Jamillah James: Sarah was one of the first, if not the first, studio visits that I did. I have an interest in how painting can move beyond what a painting is typically defined as—like a two-dimensional medium and getting into sculpture and video, this transaction of painting and screen-based technologies. She's always redefining what a painting can be. **Sarah, early in your career you were painting in abandoned houses because you didn't have studio space. How has the work changed as your circumstances improved?**

Sarah Cain: When I was working in abandoned buildings in San Francisco it was because I couldn't afford an apartment. I was basically living out of suitcase, which was brutal. How do you make your art? I feel like most artists, if you don't come from money, have that issue and you have to wrestle with it.

JJ: The kind of painting that I was encountering in New York was part of the New Casualist movement, and people were making these very small, twee paintings because real estate is very expensive there. If you have access to a large space, your work may scale up in accordance. I feel like Los Angeles people tend to have generously-sized studios, which I think plays itself out in the work. The things that are being produced here can take on epic scale.

Sarah, you've mentioned that there is a 'hyper-feminine' element to your work. Can you elaborate on this?

SC: First I'm a painter, and then I'm a woman. I get upset when people talk about my colors being feminine because what about Frank Stella? He's someone who I think my work relates to also by how fast he ripped through ideas. He just extended painting in sculpture and just kept pushing it into crazier realms. I have to consciously take up space in an aggressive way because I'm a petite woman. Look at Hillary's campaign, and everything that was thrown onto her being a woman trying to extend. You look at religions and politics; there are not a lot of women. Why is that?

JJ: In the history of painting it's always been the case where women artists are marginalized in the conversation. So female artists do have to work twice as hard.

So is that a glance at where you want to take to ICA as a curator?

JJ: My commitments as a curator have always been to working with artists who may not have the visibility that they deserve, and giving a space to people that really deserve the real estate. So I am always committed to the work of women artists, artists of color, to queer identified artists, to artists who are differently-abled or who may not be trained, academically speaking. That's not to say I will not work with white male artists. I do. I have. I have a lot of those coming up. But I want to have the ICA be a space that does present in art what is differently reflective of the place that we're in right now in this country and in the world.

You are launching with a Martin Ramirez retrospective as part of PST: LA/LA, as well as an installation by Abigail DeVille. What can we expect in coming months?

JJ: In spring, we're restaging Harald Szeemann's 1974 exhibition, 'Grandfather—A Pioneer Like Us.' Meg Cranston and John Baldessari are organizing a survey of projects based on a collaboration with artist and sign painter Norm Laich. So it will be an all-star affair of L.A. artists.



"In the history of painting it's always been the case where women artists are marginalized in the conversation. So female artists do have to work twice as hard."

—Jamillah James