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Downtown's Newest Museum Is a Bright, Brilliant Addition to the Arts District



Sarah Cain, left, and Jamillah James pose with Cain's work *Now I'm Going to Tell You Everything* outside ICA LA.

Tracey Landworth Photography

Ahead of its grand opening, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

(ICA LA) is already making a noticeable mark on its corner of the Arts District.

In stark contrast to the gritty industrial grays surrounding it, ICA LA's massive exterior brick wall pops with cheerful yellows, bubble-gum pinks and glinting, multicolored glitter.

The energetic colors are part of *Now I'm Going to Tell You Everything*, a three-dimensional, site-specific outdoor painting by L.A.-based artist Sarah Cain, which activates the museum's exterior and joyfully announces its arrival to the neighborhood.

Cain is one of three artists whose work will be on display when the museum opens Sept. 9. Along with Abigail DeVille, whose installation occupies the museum's expansive Project Room, Cain's painting reveals new ICA LA curator Jamillah James' affinity for diverse, living artists.

ICA LA is the relocated, rebranded and reinvented version of what used to be the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Its main inaugural exhibit features the work of early-20th century Mexican immigrant artist Martín Ramírez, a show that was planned years ago to coincide with the Getty's expansive, regionwide PST: LA/LA initiative.

Ramírez's story is fascinating: After being diagnosed as schizophrenic, he was institutionalized for the final three decades of his life (he died in 1963). Without access to the outside world, he made art using the scrap paper, melted crayons and other disparate objects that were available to him. His images are meticulous and captivating, and this rare opportunity to see a show dedicated exclusively to his work is a highlight of PST: LA/LA.

When James took the job at ICA LA in August 2016, she immediately drew on her strength as a hyper-contemporary curator to fill out the museum's opening roster of artists.

"These are my girls," the curator says with a laugh, referring to Cain and DeVille. "I had been aware of Sarah's work for some time, and she was actually the first studio visit I did

after I joined the museum. I wanted to do something to activate the museum's outdoor space, and she was a natural fit for that."

At ICA LA, James is interested in featuring L.A. artists, particularly those who've made work since the 1970s and '80s ("work made in my lifetime," she says). As a 38-year-old with a residence and studio in Highland Park and a deep love for her adopted Southern California home, Cain fits James' curatorial interests perfectly.

It's an area that is definitely less shiny art world and more Mack trucks and smog.



Now I'm Going to Tell You Everything makes for a bold welcome to a new museum space. Cain's a very physical painter, and the energy from her body comes through in the big brushstrokes and broad splatters that pepper the wall. There are deeply personal references scattered throughout the work — a bench reminiscent of one she used to sit on with a poet friend — as well as objects culled from the museum's neighborhood, like the three sparkly backpacks she picked up at a local art store.

To create the almost sculptural outdoor painting, Cain slathered on 70 SPF sunscreen to combat the hot summer sun and enlisted the help of a friend to control the scissor lift she was on while she painted. "And then from there it's just attack-and-resolve painting, which is fun," she explains. "It's very physical and I just turn into [a] nonverbal painting monster."

"It's kind of like a chain of events," James says, explaining the way in which the three artists' works unfold across the space. "Sarah's work is what introduces the ICA LA and then brings you into Abigail's work. There's a connection between Abigail and Sarah because they are both contemporary artists who improvise and bring found materials from the site into their work. And then Abigail is a contemporary artist, who, like Ramírez, thinks about displacement and uses what is available at hand to make work."

DeVille is a New York-based artist whom James first encountered at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her process is extensive and immersive. When she installs a new work like the one she is producing for ICA LA, she arrives months ahead of time and embeds herself in the neighborhood, where she then scavenges for materials to create the piece.

The curator explains: "Abigail sourced her materials from a variety of [local] swap meets, junkyards, estate sales and surrounding streets for the installation. [Included are] wrought iron fences, cardboard, mannequin parts (often a part of her work), tarps, disused windows

and children's toys."

The artist took those disparate materials and tethered them to a cyclonic steel armature made by fabricator and welder Jonathan Bruce Williams. "This part won't be entirely visible," James says, "but will give the impression of an explosion of materials spilling outward, a whirling dervish of detritus, or a black hole of materials." Lighting and scents help complete the immersive experience of the space.

James says that while DeVille's process is very different from what Ramírez's was, she sees similarities between the two artists' work. "They both use materials at hand. Which is what Ramírez did in his hospital room with matchsticks and crayons to make these really wild drawings. I think about the general structure of Abigail's installations, which often feels like this blown-out explosion of things," she says, making an exploding sound and gesturing an explosion with her hands. "It can feel as if you're looking into the center of a swirling universe. And with a lot of Ramírez's drawings there is this kind of cyclonic composition that happens where all this parabolic line work that is happening sort of disorients the viewer. There is also something at the center of both of their work that grounds them."

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James notes that DeVille's work is entirely independent of Ramírez's; her creations were not made in response to his. "But for me," she says, "as a curator, I think they really complement each other. DeVille's work helps me think about this show in a more contemporary way as well as introduce an artist that is working today and thinking through some of the same issues that Ramírez faced in his lifetime — homelessness, the experience of being on the streets. That is something quite central to her work and something that definitely bears out in Ramírez's work, too."

Together, and from unique and diverse perspectives, Cain, DeVille and Ramírez provide a satisfyingly rich first show for ICA LA. As a group, they also suit the museum's new setting, just south of the appropriately named Industrial Street. It's an area that is definitely less shiny art world and more Mack trucks and smog.

DeVille's piece confronts that juxtaposition head-on, bringing materials from the neighborhood into the museum and asking viewers to consider the plight of the homeless people who occupy the museum's block as carefully as they consider a drawing or sculpture. Ramírez's drawings are a reminder that people with severe mental illnesses still have active

creative minds that deserve resources and cultivation. And Cain's huge, sunny painting celebrates the opening with unbridled joy, an optimistic hint of what is to come both for this impressive new museum and its surroundings.

ICA LA GRAND OPENING WEEKEND | 1717 E. Seventh St., downtown | Sat.-Sun., Sept. 9-10, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. | Free | theicala.org

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