

CAL-STATE-FULLERTON

Exhibit by new Begovich Gallery director highlights CSUF's impressive collection

'A Place for Everything, And Everything in its Place' open through Dec. 7



New Gallery Director Jennifer Frias, right, gets a hug from a visitor during the opening reception for “A Place for Everything, and Everything in Its Place: The Permanent Collection at CSUF, 1963 to the Present,” at the Begovich Gallery on campus in Fullerton on Saturday, September 7, 2019. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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When Jennifer Frias was hired in July to be the new director of the Nicholas & Lee Begovich Gallery at California State Fullerton, deciding on her first exhibit was easy. Her choice was also more than a little audacious for a newcomer.

“Before I got started, the gallery staff were working on an inventory of our collection,” said Frias, who has spent most of the last 18 years working at UC Riverside, where she was a curator and director of education. “They hadn’t gone through it in a long time.

“The dean asked me if I wanted a list. I looked at it and went, ‘Wow! We have an amazing permanent collection. Okay, this is what the first show will be about.’”

“A Place for Everything, And Everything in its Place,” which opened Sept. 7 at the Begovich Gallery, showcases half a century of artworks collected by CSUF’s College of the Arts. Dense but intelligently displayed, the exhibit includes photos from the Andy Warhol Photographic Legacy Program, pieces from the celebrated Gemini G.E.L. Workshop, and work by major artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Masami Teraoka, Laurie Lipton, Sandow Birk and Rachel Rosenthal.

For those who are unaware of CSUF’s longstanding position of influence in the California art world, it’s a revelation to see how many significant artists have been affiliated with the university’s visual arts program as either faculty, students or members of the Arts Alliance: Darryl Curran, John Leighton, Patrick Nagel, Ann Phong, Florence Arnold and Rosalyn Chodos, among many others.

Frias said she was surprised and impressed by the depth and comprehensiveness of the collection. Though she earned a master's degree in Museum Studies/Exhibition Design at CSUF in 2014, she wasn't well-acquainted with its art holdings.

"In a way, this exhibit was the perfect project for me to start with," she said. "It introduced me to this place. I got to know the people I would be working with, and I got a sense of what the College of Arts is all about."

Working closely with Visual Resources Specialist Debra Winters, who administers the art department's vast art and architecture image collection, Frias found herself marveling not only at the breadth of the inventory but the consistently intelligent approach that successive directors had made in acquiring works over the past five decades.

"As I'm going through this list, I'm coming across names that I know only from textbooks," she said. "It made me think, They really knew what they were doing through the years, even back in the 1960s when this collection started."

G. Ray Kerciu, a CSUF art professor from 1963 to 2002, initiated the university's art collection when he purchased prints as a study resource for faculty, students and the community. Kerciu had connections with some of the most important centers of printmaking at the time, including Tamarind and the Gemini G.E.L. Workshop.

Among the works he brought to the nascent collection were early-career pieces by Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg.

"Kerciu studied printmaking and when he arrived at Cal State Fullerton he started the printmaking program," Frias said. "And he had these amazing connections in the art world. He knew people who would help the university out."

Many works collected by Kerciu were donated, Frias said.

Kerciu's colleague Jerry Samuelson was a CSUF art professor from 1962 to 1975 and the Dean of Arts from 1975 to 2009. He expanded the collection during his time as gallery director.

Well-known sculptor Dextra Frankel succeeded Samuelson as gallery director. During her tenure from 1967 to 1991, works by Alexis Smith, Sam Francis, Ed Ruscha and other respected artists were acquired.

In 1992 Mike McGee became gallery director, overseeing its renaming in 2009 to The Nicholas & Lee Begovich Gallery, thanks to two donors who were longtime supporters of the visual arts in Orange County. Before he left the position in 2018, McGee purchased works by Tony Delap, Manuel Pardo, John Paul Jones, Daniel Wheeler and many others. Frias is his successor.

At the Sept. 7 opening, Frias spent a high-energy afternoon addressing the audience of about 100 visitors and mingling with the crowd afterwards. The exhibition highlighted the early collection, the contributions of Grand Central Art Center, CSUF's satellite campus in downtown Santa Ana, and works gifted by former faculty and alumni.

Frias' immersive initial experience with her university's art collection — about 48 percent is included in the exhibit — made her realize that such an extraordinary gift also carries heavy responsibilities. "At the reception when I spoke to former and current faculty members about expanding the collection, I was thinking, 'Where are we going to store all this?'"

Appropriate storage for the artwork is a serious ongoing issue, she said. The works have been stored in various locations on campus. The collection was growing and space was limited as the Visual Arts department was growing.

Frias wants to follow her predecessors' footsteps by intelligently growing the collection to reflect the relevance and diversity of the community.

She also wants to create more opportunities for artists at all stages of their careers to have a more meaningful relationship with CSUF.

"We also have a roster of artists out there who are making it so big right now," she said. "Why can't we have them here working on projects? I'd also like to see us invite emerging artists to come here so they can take their work to the next level."

Frias envisions more places to show the collection, too. The gallery will be moving to a new space on campus that is more visible and accessible to the public in the 2023-24 academic year, she said.

Reflecting on the success of the opening, Frias hopes that it sets the tone for her tenure.

"This was my way of saying, 'Hey, we have this great collection. I think we should really think about how to preserve what we have so we can keep passing this along.'"

"I joined CSUF because it has this wonderful legacy. What we created here is an important part of the contemporary art scene. My hope is really to honor that and expand on it."

"A Place for Everything, and Everything in Its Place: The Permanent Collection at CSUF, 1963 to the Present" is open through Dec. 7. Info:

www.fullerton.edu/arts/art/begovich_gallery/index.php

Jennifer Frias' favorites in the collection

Florence Arnold and her hard edge, abstraction work particularly “Untitled (Red and Orange Horizontal Chevron),” 1973-1974.

“She was a music teacher and at the age of 50 began painting. She studied and developed her technique under Karl Benjamin.”

Robert Rauschenberg’s large-scale lithograph entitled “Waves (Stoned Moon),” 1969.

“He produced it after he was invited by NASA to witness the launch of the historic Apollo 11 mission in 1969. It’s about 7 feet tall. Very poignant and reflects prints being an ideal medium to communicate social, as well as political commentaries.”

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Paul Hodgins

Paul D. Hodgins is a freelancer who previously worked at the Orange County Register since 1993. He spent more than two decades as the Register's theater critic, and for eight years he wrote about dance as well. Hodgins has also written for American Theatre, Variety, The Sondheim Review and Backstage West. Hodgins has also been active as an educator and scholar. He was the music director of the dance department at The University of California, Irvine from 1985-92 and served in similar positions at Eastern Michigan University, Vancouver's Simon Fraser University and the Banff Centre

for the Arts. His book about relationships between music and choreography, 'Music, Movement and Metaphor,' was published in 1992. Since 2001, Hodgins has taught arts and entertainment journalism at California State University, Fullerton. Hodgins holds a doctorate in musical composition and theory from the University of Southern California. He lives in Huntington Beach.

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