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Curating a Collection of Alumni Art for CSUF Begovich Gallery

CSUF's Nicholas & Lee Begovich Gallery's collection of contemporary visual art has grown significantly since it was started in the 1960s. It has expanded to include recent Visual Arts alumni from CSUF's College of the Arts. Eight alumni's works are now on display in the gallery's current exhibition, Vitae: A New Generation, which is free and open to the public during regular gallery hours.

According to the exhibition wall text, former CSUF art professor G. Ray Kerciu developed a repository to serve as a resource for university faculty, students, and the community. Decades later, paintings, photography, and other media were added.

"Today, the collection, primarily of contemporary works of art, continues to thrive as a source for intellectual and artistic inquiry while challenging the traditional art historical canon by including multiple perspectives," write the exhibit's curators and researchers in their opening wall text. The museum's current show highlights the collection's newest additions, which include the works of William Camargo, Salvador De La Torre, Joe Devera, D. Hill, Nicole Merton, Beatriz Mora Hussar, Juliana Rico, and Leonard Suryajaya.

Curated by Jennifer Frias, Director of CSUF's Begovich Gallery, and Adela Tapia, Curatorial Assistant, Vitae is a group exhibition that "looks at a new generation of image makers whose work merges life experience and self-discovery while simultaneously fostering discussions around social justice." I recently had a chance to interview Frias and Tapia about their experiences curating this extensive group show, gaining further insight into the development, preparation, and installation process involved in making the exhibit possible.

According to Frias, this show has been in development since 2022, when the construction of the new gallery space was in progress. She explained that the process was a collaboration between the gallery, its staff, and a few graduate students in CSUF's Art History program.

"The artworks selected for the exhibition were already in our collection," said Frias. "At the time we began the project, graduate students Clark Silva (MA, Art History, '23) and Jillian Bentley (MA, Art History, '22) provided the preliminary research for the works in the show, and then Adela Tapia (MA, Art History, '24) anchored the remaining research and assisted in the overall programming of the exhibition."

They started with a deep dive into the collection itself, examining the artworks, their histories and their stories. From there, they identified underlining concepts and narratives that would resonate with contemporary audiences. Frias and her team considered how the exhibition could invite dialogue and accessibility to diverse viewers and looked into how they could honor the integrity of the collection while presenting it in fresh, innovative ways.

"Ultimately, we wanted to generate an exhibit that highlights the richness of the museum's holdings while fostering a meaningful connection between the audience, the artworks, and the University," said Frias.

Tapia added, "It was imperative to the exhibition's development that artists' authentic voices remain intact. We wanted to communicate their powerful narratives to the audience in an organic, accessible presentation. From the perspective of an art historian, the goal is to preserve the artist's voice when writing for the viewer. Honoring the artists without personal interpretation allows the viewer to create their meaningful connections to the artist and their artwork."

Developing Vitae from the university's permanent art collection presented a few unique challenges for the curators and gallery staff. I learned from both Frias and Tapia that when curating and designing an exhibit of this scope, nuances are often not apparent during the initial planning stages, including the lighting, the flow of movement through the space, and the scale of the space itself. Preservation was one challenge that they faced.

"A few pieces are fragile, like Beatriz Mora Hussar's intricate metal sculpture/body ornamentation, or sensitive to light, like Juliana Rico and William Camargo's photographs," explained Frias. "And with those factors in mind, designing the gallery space creates a few constraints that may restrict how we display the works."

Despite these minor and easily resolvable challenges, Frias and the Begovich Gallery exhibition team were able to showcase the artworks in new and meaningful ways. She explained that one example of this can be seen in the pedestal for Mora

Hussar's sculptures, which was designed with recycled materials as a nod to her artistic practice. Frias elaborated that the birch platform base was designed so patrons could visually experience it yet distant enough that it was protected.

"The singular voices of the artists serve as a springboard to objective dialogue and social change," explained Tapia. "The opportunity to showcase their work alongside their peers has been inspiring."

Artist alumni featured in Vitae were incredibly grateful to have been a part of it. "Because of their involvement with the show, the artists expressed how it was sort of a homecoming to be involved with CSUF, again, where they have fostered a sense of community," she said.

Mounting the exhibition as part of the inauguration of the new Begovich Gallery space, Frias and her team thought it was natural to emphasize how the legacy of the Visual Arts is moving forward "while introducing a new blueprint that looks at the progress in how we make, talk, and look at art."

Reflecting on her experience curating Vitae, Frias thought it was gratifying to see the CSUF alumni artists reconnect with their roots, showcase



Vitae - A New Generation Exhibit inside Begovich Gallery at CSUF



their artistic growth, and inspire current students and the broader community. She felt that the exhibit also cultivated a sense of pride and belonging among the alumni artists and patrons who came to the exhibition's opening reception back in early November 2024.

She said, "The most rewarding experience curating Vitae was witnessing the convergence of past and present creative journeys and to see our permanent collection grow in its narrative and purpose. It was also great to see the vibrant exchange of ideas, and to reflect on the importance of diversity in artistic expression and dialogue. Showcasing these artists and their work demonstrates how Cal State Fullerton has become known for transforming its art students into significant players on the national and international art scene."

"Collaborating with the artists, contributors, curators, and the entire Begovich Gallery team was a privilege," said Tapia. "The beauty of the

collaboration culminates in a full circle moment for the artists. To witness their evolution as they retrace their footsteps on campus is powerful. The dedication and commitment of everyone involved are indicative of the community fostered within CSUF's College of the Arts. There is a collective pride in celebrating alumni and students; the inspiration is infectious."

Vitae: A New Generation at CSUF's Begovich Gallery is open until May 17th. The CSUF Art Alliance supports the show, CSUF's Instructional Related Activities Grant, the College of the Arts, and the Department of Visual Arts. Visiting hours are from 11am to 4pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays.

The Begovich Gallery is located in CSUF Visual Arts Building G off of N. State College Boulevard and Arts Drive. Please note that parking is free at the university on Friday evenings after 5pm and all day Saturday and Sunday; parking is available in the Nutwood Parking Structure.

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