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ART & EXHIBITS

Up your selfie game at Cantor Arts Center's new Instagram-ready sculpture garden

Sam Whiting | May 15, 2019 | Updated: May 23, 2019, 12:31 pm



Cardboard mock-up of Deborah Kass' "OY/YO" welcomes visitors at the Cantor Arts Center.
Photo: Cantor Arts Center

The life-size bronze sculpture of St. Katharina painted Stanford Cardinal red stands ready to go viral on Instagram, and that's the point.

"We are trying to make this a 21st century museum so that we can connect with our 21st century audiences," says Susan Dackerman, who was hired in 2017 as director of the Cantor Arts Center. "There is extra pressure on us here at Stanford to stay up to date, stay current, stay innovative. The expectation at such a future-facing university is that the museum has to be future-facing as well."



Cardboard mock-up of Deborah Kass' "OY/YO," as seen leaving the Cantor Arts Center. Photo: Cantor Arts Center

Dackerman is not an active Instagrammer, but she hopes more Millennials and college students will be drawn to the newly activated Cantor courtyard. And this photogenic setup of five objects by esteemed German sculptor Katharina Fritsch marks the spot where Dackerman is implementing her master plan.

The area, where the original Stanford Art Museum from 1891 was joined with a glassy new addition in 1999 to form the Cantor, had been mostly vacant since the museum reopened before the start of the millennium. Now it's selfie-ready.

"The courtyard is the core of the building," says Dackerman, who serves as the John and Jill Freidenrich director. "It is the heart and soul, and usually it lies empty. This is great underutilized space."

Dackerman has big plans to fill the courtyard's 2,500 square feet. Outdoor furniture is coming, and a retractable movie screen will soon drop in front of a wall covered in ivy. This will be the place for projected images and video installations to be screened in the evening.

"Y'know, use the space for conversation," she says, "for hanging out."

Later this summer, another sculpture will stand as the permanent greeter beneath the Greek friezes and Roman columns at the Cantor museum's historic entrance. The aluminum piece is a commissioned work by Deborah Kass, titled "OY/YO" — from the parking lot, it beckons with the word "YO" and when leaving, it reads "OY." It stands 8 feet tall and 15 feet wide, and is painted Lamborghini yellow.

"We're doing this because students find this facade intimidating and unapproachable," Dackerman says. "This is a welcome."



Susan Dackerman, director of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, stands with new sculptures in the museum's courtyard in Palo Alto. Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

As visitors enter the grand marble atrium, which was constructed in 1891, they'll next be greeted by a black curtain hanging from the ceiling. This new acquisition, an installation by **Stephanie Syjuco**, carries a message: "I am an American." But the final word is almost illegible, the curtain scrunched up at the end so that the sentence can be left to interpretation.

"She's interested in the illegibility of national identity," Dackerman said. "This could read, 'I am an African,' 'I am an Armenian.'"



Susan Dackerman, Cantor Arts Center director, stands in the Stanford University art museum in Palo Alto.
Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle



Cantor arts center Director Susan Dackerman sits in front of a piece by Kahill Joseph titled "BLKNWS" in Palo Alto, alongside Cara Goger (left), a visitor. Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

Continuing from the atrium, down the long corridor, there's a set of flickering screens. This is "BLKNWS," a video installation by Kahlil Joseph. "He's broadcasting this via Wi-Fi from his studio in L.A.," Dackerman says, "and he's changing it all the time."

That's also what Dackerman is doing with Cantor's galleries. Even the most classic works in the collection have been given a contemporary touch.

Rodin's "The Thinker," which has been in the central rotunda since the museum was **expanded and reopened**, now has a "thought bubble" overhead in the fashion of a multi-pronged fluorescent light sculpture by Spencer Finch. The gallery for European paintings, most staid in the collection, is now joined by a series of five woodblock prints, created by African artist Yinka Shonibare in 2017, and recently acquired for the collection.

In July, the Cantor's collection of four paintings by **Stanford alum Richard Diebenkorn** will be coming out of storage for permanent display, in the room with Finch's light sprocket.

"What we're trying to do is get a greater density of art to attract a greater density of people," Dackerman says.

But the big structural change for Cantor is in the Pigott Family Gallery on the ground floor. As the largest room in the museum, it has always been the location of **touring and temporary exhibitions**. Now Dackerman has moved the touring shows upstairs. She wants the best interior real estate to show off **Cantor's own collection**.



Caroline Berzins, Julia Gillette, Mitzi Harris, and Lavanya Mahadevan in the Pigott Family Gallery with Titus Kaphar's portrait (background). Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

On display indefinitely is "The Medium is the Message: Art Since 1950," the first show curated by Aleesa P. Alexander, one of several new hires by the museum to help bring fresh perspective. The showcase painting is Titus Kaphar's 2018 interpretation of Thomas Jefferson's "Farm Book," from 1793.

But the main conversation piece truly is Fritsch's "6. Stillben (6th Still Life)," cast in 2011 and on a long-term loan from San Francisco collectors James and Dana Tananbaum.

“She takes these everyday objects and blows them way out of scale, puts them in these crazy colors and they lose their meaning,” Dackerman says, as she walks among them under the bright sunshine. “They become enigmatic and mysterious, and she’s interested in the confusion that is created there.”

The courtyard is at the midpoint between the **Rodin Sculpture Garden** on the west side of the building and the mammoth steel sheet of Richard Serra’s “Sequence,” on the east side. In February, “Sequence” was returned to its rightful place after a **two-year loan** to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



“Sequence” by Richard Serra has been returned to the Cantor Arts Center.

Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

To make room for “Sequence,” an angular steel sculpture by Ellsworth Kelly was moved to a circular patio branded the McMurtry Terrace.

“The Serra and the Ellsworth Kelly provide a historical foundation for us,” says Dackerman, “but what we’re trying to do here is show that we’re part of the global present.”

Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Friday-Sunday; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday. Free. 328 Lomita Drive, Stanford. 650-723-4177. museum.stanford.edu



"6. Stillben (6th Still Life)" 2011, by Katharina Fritsch. Bronze, epoxy and paint.
Photo: Cantor Arts Center

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