

Interview with Jamillah James

Lindsay Preston Zappas

Jamillah James had, by her own account, a late start to curating. Her mother was a musician, and so she grew up playing—impressively—the violin, tuba, drums, and bass, and became heavily involved in the music scene while living in Chicago in her early 20s. James and her roommate put together shows in the basement of their Southside loft, where she says they brought experimental noise acts, “not just for the weirdos like me, but also people that look like me who felt like they didn’t really have a place in the scene.”

Between her time in Chicago and her first institutional curating gig in New York in 2010, James worked a variety of odd-jobs: Whole Foods; a “weird theater in Chicago that did an insane revival of *Rocky Horror*”; at Scholastic Books; and even as a nanny—a detail that, as James notes, most people that know her find “hilarious.”

Yet, over time, James was pulled toward the art world as the opportunity to build sustained, meaningful relationships with curators, writers, and artists felt increasingly important. It was during her time working in Baltimore that she committed fully to curatorial work, finding newfound freedom in the city’s supportive arts community. She slowly gained confidence in her ideas and embraced her identity as a curator.

In 2010, James moved back to New York in part out of necessity, overcoming a catastrophic illness

just as her career in curating began to get legs. As her health recovered, she began a fellowship at the Queens Museum that would mark the start of her work in institutions. Since then, James has held curatorial posts at top museums—the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Hammer, and now, at the ICA LA—in what she calls a “quick ascent.”

I recently sat down with James to discuss her background, career, and her thoughts on the responsibility of the museum to be accessible, accountable, and willing to learn from its public. She discusses the contemporary as something that is “actively unfolding” and is cognizant of a curator’s responsibility to respond and adapt to the changing times alongside her community.



“We can’t just pretend that we’re working in a vacuum anymore. None of us are immune to having to be held accountable for our decisions.”

Photo: Paul Mpagi Sepuya



Above: B. Wurtz: *This Has No Name*,
(installation view) (2019).
Image courtesy of the artist and ICA LA.
Photo: Brian Forrest/ICA.

Below: Lucas Blalock, *An Enormous Oar*
(installation view) (2019).
Image courtesy of the artist and ICA LA.
Photo: Elon Schoenholz/ICA LA.

Lindsay Preston Zappas: You've said that you're late to curating—did you feel like you had to play catch up? Can you tell me about those early moments with “gatekeepers,” and how you acquainted yourself with the art world's specialty knowledge?

Jamillah James: For a long time, and maybe in some respects [this is] still lingering, I had a lot of sensitivities about being an “older person” In my mid-, late-twenties, being in entry level art history courses and graduating school at 25. I had to hustle. I saw that [my peers] were hitting benchmarks really early and I thought, “Oh, I should be where they are, but I don't know how.”

And to be honest, it was also this barrier that I had in my mind—which may not have been too inaccurate—being a black woman in this field, and not being sure if I would have opportunities. It took a really long time for me to feel confident in my ideas, to put myself out there to really go for things that suited me well. Or to feel that I could bring something to the table.

LPZ: Did it stand out to you as sort of a “moment” went you got the job at the Queens Museum, and later the Hammer Museum? Was that palpable?

JJ: Huge! Hugely, hugely important. It was a new lease on life. I had survived this catastrophic health event. I was able to come back to New York, the city that I loved, and then I landed with an institutional gig in the city of New York. I moved here [to L.A.] five years ago, after 3 years at the Studio Museum in Harlem—which was pivotal and further life-changing for me—to be assistant curator at the Hammer, which was an incredible opportunity. I had no designs on moving to Los Angeles. I was enrolled in a PhD program that I was going to be starting at the University of Rochester that fall.

LPZ: And then the Hammer called.

JJ: And then the Hammer called. I have no regrets whatsoever. It's the best and

smartest decision I've made, to be here. I wouldn't be here with you right now if it hadn't been for the Hammer hiring me.

LPZ: What was it like to go to the ICA after your experiences working on a team of curators at other museums? At the ICA, you are the entire curatorial team. Was it freeing or daunting?

JJ: It's an amalgamation of those things. It is an interesting proposition to [come] out of a situation where there is a team dynamic, where I was a junior curator on a team of some of the best curators working today. It was a steep learning curve, I'm not gonna lie—to be the person that's in a position of management is a whole different ball of wax. It's the vote of confidence that I've been looking for. I have the capacity and the opportunity now to work on larger projects that have historical scope or are more complex, and [I'm] actually assembling a program: I'm thinking about how things relate to each other and [about] being really responsible to our public by virtue of the things that we're putting on the schedule.

LPZ: How do you balance feeling beholden to Los Angeles as a region with also looking outward to a larger art conversation?

JJ: We're a city that has a lot of contemporary art museums of varying scales. There are so many great places that are making really fine exhibitions. So how do you move to distinguish yourself and your program? And I think the one thing I know that we're committed to is really giving a place to artists that are in this city—not just focusing on the local but contextualizing the local across the country, across the international landscape. We have this flexibility that our larger institutions in the city might not have because we're just operating on a shorter timeline. So we can operate between these longer term projects and then these shorter term projects that can be responsive.

LPZ: I think that's so important because a lot can go down—as we've seen—in two years. So to have shows that are on the books for longer that you can cook with and sort of flesh out, but also have shows that kind of respond to this moment.

JJ: I think the thing to keep in mind is that the contemporary is still something that's actively unfolding and its history is still actively being written and produced. So having a show that you're preparing for five, six years can become very untimely very quickly. And I don't want to be in a position where the work, the scholarship, that I'm doing and putting so much effort into—and [putting] time, blood, sweat, and tears into in the form of an exhibition—has to play catch up with what the present is.

LPZ: I want to talk about 1717.

JJ: Yes! So, 1717 is our egalitarian version of a museum membership where it's a fixed amount that people pay to have access. People might think that museums are very period after exclusive. And that's not a good thing. To democratize the model of development in a museum and how we reach out to people—but also have people engage with, and support the museum, and start thinking philanthropically—is something that is really critically important. \$40 seems like a pretty okay amount, and the goal ultimately—which is a very lofty, but an incredible goal—is to have the museum be 100 percent crowdfunded, essentially, by its members.

LPZ: Is that viable?

JJ: It's a really intense, high number, but we're on our way. A lot of people have joined 1717, which is really incredible. It's the brainchild of our astute and wonderful deputy director and director of development, Samuel Vasquez, who came up with this idea because we as museum workers are really exhausted by the idea that it has to be these mega-funders that support everything that we do. How can we open up the walls

of the museum and open up the process of philanthropy to average people who are interested in being a part of a community?

LPZ: Not to mention the nefarious side of museum donors and boards: the money again and again is where the art world gets dark really fast.

JJ: We're in a real place of reckoning right now with not just how museums are funded and supported and who's doing that funding and supporting, but also the content of what's being shown at museums. I mean, we've seen it on several occasions in the last couple of years where the public is really holding institutions to account, and institutions need to be flexible and accommodate that discourse if they're going to improve.

The museum is an imperfect structure, and there are so many places that it can expand and improve itself—from staffing decisions, to how it gets its money, to how inclusive its program is. Museums just need to work on not perpetuating the status quo, and not just replicating the systems and structures of power that we see every day and are subject to and oppressed by every day.

I mean, [the art world] is not really a safe haven. We're all living in and working through these conditions, and the things that are happening that are much larger impact the work that we do every day. We're in a microcosm within a grander scheme of things, but the boundaries are so tattered, so blurry, and porous. We can't just pretend that we're working in a vacuum anymore. None of us are immune to having to be held accountable for our decisions. I know people can get fatigued by trying to do the right thing, but if there's anyone that can really do the right thing, or try to do the right thing, I would hope it's people within the art world.

LPZ: Why? What gives you that hope? Because we're weirder?

JJ: A lot of just thinking about how many people, voices, sensibilities, and subjectivities come together in this field.



Hammer Projects: Simone Leigh
(installation view) (2017).
Image courtesy of the artist and the Hammer
Museum. Photo: Brian Forrest.

There's always room for improvement. There is dire improvement needed in so many areas, but I hope because we are, at our very basic, creative people.

I think it's an imperative: we're citizens first—curators, writers, artists, whatever second—and just having a mindfulness and wanting to think about the future and what this world will look like after all of us are dead and gone. Not to be morbid about it, but what is the legacy that we want to have? What is the history that we want to have? What is it that we want people that succeed us to think about the work that we've done?

LPZ: I'm curious how you bridge that desire with the larger population outside of our little art world. People can feel intimidated by the museum, like they're not free to have their own interpretation of a piece of work. How do you address that at the ICA?

JJ: Something that is important to me is making sure that people feel welcome at the museum because [the institution of] the museum has a lot of baggage. It has a lot of associations with privilege and exclusivity. I know this from a personal place, being a person who never felt that comfortable going to museums or couldn't afford to go to museums.

Museums are hard. Not everyone wants to go to one as much as you want them to. I mean there are museums that charge \$25, and that's like a meal; that's a whole lot of things to a lot of people, and it might not necessarily be a priority to go to a museum. We're free at the ICA, which is really important. We have bilingual didactics, which is important to speak to the vastness of the audience that we hopefully serve.

We write to a certain reading level with our didactics because, I mean, honestly, I don't wanna read a bunch of blather when I go to museums. I'm not gonna drag anyone, but sometimes it's really tedious and it doesn't need to be. There are very direct ways that you can talk to people without talking over them or talking down to them. I want to work

in a world where I can talk to a colleague about a show in the same language that I talk to anyone else in my life who's not an active participant in this field.

LPZ: We talked earlier about gatekeepers, and now you kind of are one. [Jamillah sighs]. There are so many hierarchies in the art world and the curator at the contemporary art museum is a pretty esteemed position. Can you speak to those hierarchies—are they bullshit, are they important? What can you tell young artists?

JJ: You know, I'm glad that there are gatekeepers. I've learned a lot from the gatekeepers I've worked with over time, and I still rely quite heavily on their expertise, support, and mentoring. I like to keep a low profile. I know that sounds like total and utter BS, but I like to do my work and mind my business. But at the same time, I like to be available, particularly to younger people who are trying to figure this all out. If I can come with some of my expertise and do a studio visit with a student and have a very frank conversation with them about what they're doing and introduce other ideas or other artists for them to look at or think about, that's the fun thing for me—to impart what is allegedly my expertise—just to help them navigate the world, because it's hard out here. Artists sometimes don't think of what they do as a profession, which is a shame.

LPZ: I love these conversations because we're all people, we're all learning, we're all growing, we're all human. Professions are in so many ways self-taught, and you find your way through it.

JJ: I wish when I was younger that I had people that wanted to be generous and reach out, and it took a long time to get to the point where I had those people in my life who were really committed to mentorship and wanting to help the next generation of people come up. I don't know, it's like, why not?

LPZ: I love it.

JJ: I'm not going to be around forever, you know? So why not be generous and engage on as many levels as you can?

This interview has been adapted for print from The Carla Podcast, Episode 14. Listen to the full hour-long interview with Jamillah at contemporaryartreview.la/episode-14, or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Jamillah James is Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She is co-curator of the 2021 New Museum Triennial at the New Museum, New York. She has held curatorial positions at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Queens Museum, New York; and organized many exhibitions, performances, screenings, and public programs at alternative and artist-run spaces throughout the US and Canada since 2004. She has contributed texts to *Artforum*, *The International Review of African American Art*, and various institutional exhibition catalogues. James is a visiting critic in the graduate department at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena.



Alex Da Corte: *A Season in He'll* (installation view) (2016). Image courtesy of the artist and Art + Practice.
Photo: Brian Forrest/Hammer Museum.