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Local, Virginia

VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art names chief curator

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By Katherine Calos



*Stephanie Smith
Courtesy The Institute for
Contemporary Art*

The Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University is building its stature in the art world with the appointment of a chief curator who brings international contacts and recognition.

Stephanie Smith currently is chief curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. With a permanent collection of more than 90,000, it's one of the largest art museums in North America.

In Richmond, she will join a robust team that is building the ICA into a signature noncollecting museum.

"With contemporary museums that don't have a collection," said ICA Director Lisa Freiman, it's "super important ... to have a super group of people on board."

When Freiman was hired, "there was a real aspirational desire for the ICA to be engaged internationally," she said. "I've been keeping my eye out for people like that. Stephanie is very well respected in the contemporary art world. The opportunity presented itself. We were in a position that we were able to move pretty quickly to get her hired."

Smith said she is excited about coming in to develop a museum program from the ground up. The landmark ICA building, designed by Steven Holl Architects, is under construction at Belvidere and Broad streets. Its opening is planned for 2017.

“Part of the attraction is the beautiful building that’s going up on the corner,” Smith said. “It’s a gorgeous form, but it also seems a hospitable, welcoming space for all kinds of public and all kinds of exciting programs.”

Smith, 46, began her career at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and was also a curator at Rice University, where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in art history. She was at the University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art for 15 years in several roles, including deputy director and chief curator.

“I think the ICA is perfectly positioned for me,” she said. “It brings different strands of my past experiences together. In some ways it’s a noncollecting contemporary art museum, in some ways a university art gallery, in some ways a cultural institution that needs to be embedded in the culture of Richmond.”

In Toronto, Smith has shown the ability to work within the bureaucracy of a big institution to develop “shows that are popular with the public but deal with critical issues,” Freiman said. “She has a reputation for experimental and successful programs that communities rally around. I think Richmond is going to love her and she is going to love Richmond.”

Smith, who grew up in St. Louis, said she is “excited that VCU is clearly an institution committed to questions of social change and equity.”

Art is more than painting and sculpture, she said. It’s also about performance and participation.

“A lot of projects that I work on have explored new ways that artists are working today,” Smith said. A show called FEAST at the Smart Museum “was also creating performances and organizing meals and conversations and thinking about things that extend our notion of what art can be. There are a lot of different ways to reach the public. The space is designed to support that full range from sculpture to performance to potluck.”