

New ICA exhibits engage audiences in reimagined spaces

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On Saturday, the Institute for Contemporary Art will open a pair of new exhibitions, prompting audience interaction and spatial reinterpretation of the building's first two floors.

Two of the artists behind the new installations are people of color, and all three are women.

"In immersive experiences in the galleries, these artists offer compelling critiques of our present moment and also visions for other possible futures," ICA Chief Curator Stephanie Smith said, "which they're exploring with generosity and with clarity."

On the first floor, "Give It or Leave It" by Cauleen Smith uses film, video and sculpture to capture Smith's vision for feminism and the black community. It starts in the Beverly W. Reynolds Gallery and sprawls into the Royall Forum with visual traces of the artist's design. The show was reimagined for its Richmond appearance after an initial run at the ICA in Philadelphia.

A site-specific feature of Smith's show in Richmond includes "Sit at the Feet of Action," a series of colorful film gels covering the windows, sorting rays of sunlight into the colors of a rainbow. In the gallery, a few lawn chairs are available for visitors.

"What you're invited to contemplate while you sit in here for a while is the fact that the Earth is rotating around the sun," Smith said. "And the gel-colored light lets you see that happen in a way that you can't really be aware of unless there's something marking the time, like a sundial."

Smith experiments with sound by simultaneously playing the soundtracks of several videos from different corners of the space. Notes from miscellaneous instruments clash midair, creating an ambience to accompany a diverse range of visual mediums.

Two new films within the exhibition, "Pilgrim" and "Sojourner," highlight Smith's core themes, exploring current events and recent history. They converse with the rest of the gallery to realize a hopeful future.

The inaugural installment of the ICA's annual "Dialogues" series is found upstairs, where Irena Haiduk and Martine Syms reimagine the "V" shape made by their neighboring galleries. Each artist presents their own distinct vision, but the arrangement of the spaces evokes a comparison between the two messages.

In one half of the installation, Haiduk rethinks the Western economy with "Tableau Economique" and Yugoexport, a full-fledged apparel business set up in the ICA that symbolizes larger corporations. Mimicking a defunct Yugoslavian manufacturer, Yugoexport is what Haiduk calls an "oral corporation." It uses its own website and the ICA's gallery as points of distribution.

Yugoexport mainly produces dresses and shoes – pieces of the Yugoform, an outfit which can be purchased at what Haiduk calls "flexible pricing," based on the buyer's income level. The shoe's image represents the concept behind Haiduk's project.



Artist Cauleen Smith experiments with sound and light in "Give It or Leave It" on the first floor of the Institute for Contemporary Art. Photo by Jon Mirador.

"What the shoe does is further this architecture of labor," Haiduk said. "It's a clock. When you put it on, you work. When you put it off, you don't work ... We really wanted to think about the right to leisure."

In the other half of "Dialogues," Syms continues the discussion with "Shame Space." It explores the way the black people are represented in technology. A video plays on four monitors, and a chatbot prompts viewers to send text messages to a listed phone number. The messages from guests then influence the narrative of the show, and the artificial-intelligence narrator reacts to how her questions are answered.

The chatbot speaks in an unusual style, asking complicated questions about body dysmorphia, the cultivation of joy and the behavior of other people. According to ICA Assistant Curator Amber Esseiva, these questions come from Syms' voice in the project.

"Martine Syms is a young artist who, through her work, is very interested in exploring the way that the black image circulates," Esseiva said. "Specifically how it circulates in film, media and various other entertainment industries in which the black reference is very prolific and makes its mark."

The newest exhibitions at the Institute for Contemporary Art will open to the public February 16. Admission is free.