

From Intention to Intentionality: Centering Equity, Inclusion and Representation in Cultural Preservation

Oral Presentation By Leticia Gomez Franco, Executive Director, Balboa Art Conservation Center

Diversity in Collections Care: Many Voices, a two-day virtual colloquium to promote exchange of research, dialogue, and inspiration.

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Oral Presentation Script:

Hello, My name is Leticia Gomez Franco, and I am the Executive Director of the Balboa Art Conservation Center, I join you today from the ancestral homelands of the Kumeyaay Nation. Colonially known as the San Diego Tijuana border region of Southern California/Baja California Norte. The Kumeyaay peoples continue to maintain their connection to, and care for, this land.

I want to thank the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts for organizing this timely colloquium and inviting us to be a part of it. It is a privilege to join you all and share with you a bit of our journey. I will be reading from a script I have prepared and am including a link of it in the chat for your reference and ease of use. I want to thank Sanchita Balachandran who did this recently at a webinar I attended, and I found this to be a beautiful act of accessibility, so in the spirit of learning and applying new models of engagement, I'm following her lead.

I'm here today to tell you about the work the Balboa Art Conservation Center has recently embarked on.

Last summer, like many of your institutions, in the throes of dual pandemics, covid-19 and systemic racism and violence against the Black community, The Balboa Art Conservation Center or BACC, as I will refer to it moving forward, decided it was time to make a change. The staff considered the realm of possibilities: at the time, a solidarity statement and the black social media square were both popular options, after much thought, the staff presented to the board the idea of Preserve Community Art.

Preserve Community Art was a staff driven initiative born in response to both a long standing need to acknowledge systemic racism and exclusion in the field of conservation as well as in direct and immediate response to the Summer of 2020 movement led by Black Lives Matter to address racial injustice. In its initial form, Preserve Community Art sought to support the documentation and preservation of San Diego Protest Art. The staff got to work on creating guidelines for protest art preservation and preventive care and put a call out to community members who could benefit from what BACC had to offer.

The staff at the time, put much thought into how to approach this work. it was after all, a new direction.

Assuming, like most of us do, that if we took the time and the resources to build it, "they" would come.

BACC built it, but much to its surprise "they" did not come.

BACC did have the opportunity to work with a couple community led projects, but in all honesty, the Black community, whose historical exclusion from these services was what inspired the creation of Preserve Community Art - was not engaged.

I titled this talk From Intention to Intentionality.

BACC's intention was to address the disparity in access to conservation services and engage the Black community and communities of color in art conservation.

But intentions, as well intentioned as they may be, are passive.

Intentions are what we wake up with in the morning.

What we say to ourselves in the mirror to remind us that we've got this.

What we whisper into the wind.

We put intentions out, because we believe in some cosmic flow that will take them somewhere and materialize them for us.

but.

Intentions are just that. Mutterings of what we want.

The journey from intention to intentionality is a long one. It starts with intention sure. we need those. to verbalize what is in our hearts. But without intentionality, those intentions just sit there. idly.

For BACC, Preserve Community Art was intention.

And so you understand what a big deal these intentions were, let me tell you a little about BACC.

The Balboa Art Conservation Center was founded in the 70's as part of a national movement to create regional conservation centers that would serve collecting institutions within a certain geography. The goal was to centralize conservation and preservation services, bringing relief to museums, historical centers, libraries, and other collecting institutions, fulfilling their conservation needs without having to replicate the administrative, equipment, staffing and resources needed to run an entire conservation lab at every single institution.

The intention here, was to create access.

There are less than a dozen of these regional conservation centers in the country. They are spread out, kind-of, BACC is the only regional conservation center in the west coast. We're located in San Diego, on Kumeyaay lands, and because we're the only ones out here, our mandate is to serve California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Colorado and Alaska. We are an eight member team, in a 2 thousand square foot facility on the second floor of a historical building in Balboa Park.

With all of our limitations, we, like the rest of the regional centers, are uniquely positioned. We are a full service conservation lab and we are *also* nonprofit organizations. As a conservation lab, we are committed to conserving and preserving the collections of our nonprofit partners like everyone else, but as a nonprofit, we have a higher mandate, a responsibility to public benefit. a call to public good. At the minimum, we know that our service to our nonprofit collecting institutions is somewhat a public benefit. right? helping museums conserve the works in their collections serves a common good purpose. This has been good enough for the 45 years that BACC has been in operation.

But when we're setting out intentions like serving the Black community and we know, thanks to recent studies that only 1.2% of artworks in museum holdings are made by Black artists, how do we bridge our intentions with our service.

We've learned a couple of unfortunate statistics over the past 30 years.

In 1993, the American Institute for Conservation conducted a Strategic Planning Questionnaire through which it found that 95% of the conservation field is made up of white conservators. A survey conducted 25 years later in 2018 by the Mellon Foundation on art museum workforce demographics, found that 89% of conservators working in art museums are white (the Intellectual leadership positions category which includes conservation, curatorial, education and museum leadership positions was 80% white), and a subsequent study mentioned earlier may have found some correlation between museum workforce demographics and their collections, when it found that 85% of artists represented in museum collections are, you guessed it, white. We can deduce from this that the less diverse the workforce, the less diverse the collection. The less diverse the collection, the less appealing a career in the arts becomes to non-white folks, and the less likely they are to join a workforce that does little to welcome them anyway. I call this the cycle of exclusion.

Confronted with these findings, the arts and archives sector must accept that if it indeed seeks to achieve equity and inclusion, in the workforce just as much as in collections, representation matters.

and that's a whole other entire colloquium.

As far as BACC and our intentionality goes, being a nonprofit presents us some great opportunities. Unlike a conservation lab in a museum, we are not limited to caring for the holdings of any particular institution, therefore, while unfortunate, the lack of representation of artists from Black, Indigenous and People of Color in museum collections shouldn't be what deters us from creating access. We look forward to a day when we are caring for more diverse holdings from institutions and those holdings are accessible and representative of our society, but in the meantime, there is work to be done in the field of art conservation and in our own centers. So 45 years after its founding, BACC as a nonprofit regional conservation center, can stop washing its hands of the responsibility of serving our communities and the public equitably.

But what does this mean? We tried right? We made an initiative, we posted it on our website. We emailed community organizations. Where did we go wrong?

Well it turns out that after 45 years of being a historically white run and white serving institution and in many ways deliberately excluding communities of color from accessing our services, we have a bit more work to do. We opened up our doors in a symbolic move, but forgot to address the boltlocked gates and the giant walls surrounding our institutions.

If we are going to be intentional about our efforts to be inclusive, then we have to commit to a shift.

Something has to change, and that something is us.

For BACC, our journey to intentionality started with PCA as our intention, when that didn't go as planned, we discussed all the reasons why a community who has been denied access in the past, may not be too excited about engaging now. We talked about the importance of naming and knowing those communities. We talked about the effects of institutional racism, and how we, as an institution both benefited and contributed to that oppression. We talked about legacies of colonialism. We talked about knowledge, and epistemological privilege. We identified areas where we could start today, to make change. some of those are

The disturbing lack of diversity in the field of art conservation
the barriers to access to conservation and preservation services and
the false notion that as art conservators we have access to elite, correct and perfect methods and approaches to cultural preservation that other communities need.

our next step was memorializing these conversations. These moments of self realization are important and verbalizing them, like our intentions, is an important part of holding ourselves accountable. The staff and board at BACC worked on a Cultural Equity Statement, it was unanimously and enthusiastically supported by our staff and board. It serves as our blueprint and in it, we see the gates we deliberately built, the locks, the barriers, and can now work on a plan to tear these down. There are two main commitment areas in our statement, to help create diversity and inclusion in the workforce and to shift conservation and preservation work itself to be inclusive and responsive to institutionally underrepresented communities and collections. Neither of these should happen in isolation.

And this is where we are now. In this moment. The past year has been a transformative one for the arts and historical preservation. And we find ourselves thinking some pretty deep thoughts about who we want to be moving forward. I don't think we'd be in this place if both of these life shattering moments had not synchronized. The pandemic forced us to pause. to stop. and the demand for racial justice forced us to reckon with our participation in white supremacy and privilege, forcing us to be deliberate about how we hit restart. If we chose to continue as we were, that is a choice we are making.

BACC has chosen to shift. If we want to change, we have to make changes.

After 45 years of traditional conservation service, BACC is ready to transform into a conservation center that is radically inclusive and promotes knowledge exchange and collections care that centers the narratives of those underrepresented. We are committed to expanding our training and education services to demystify the field of conservation, creating training opportunities for emerging conservation professionals of color and partnering with stewards of community cultural collections.

beyond just expanding access to the field of conservation to underrepresented communities we also commit to expanding the existing knowledge base to include culturally conscious and responsive methods of conservation. In doing so BACC seeks to be a radical force behind the reimagining of the field of conservation altogether.

why we need to reimagine? because the field as ever evolving as it may be has also been consistently predominantly white. therefore it is only evolving within a eurocentric framework.

a field that is 95% white may not be aware of what it feels like to be a person of color working in cultural preservation.

a field that is 95% white may not be aware of what it feels like as a person of color to walk into a museum and not see themselves.

a field that is 95% white may not be aware that culture exists outside of their institutions. and its not marginalized just because its denied access by the field. it exists gloriously in its own space. in defiance. as survival.

a field that is 95% white should be aware that the world it lives in, the country it lives in and the history it lives in is not 95% white and it's time to reflect who we really are as a society.

it is time.

I join you today as a bit of an oddball. I'm not an art conservator. I lead an art conservation center.

but I come to it as a community organizer and a fervent advocate for cultural preservation. I bring to this table my chair and my personal experience, speaking my truth, as a Xicana, daughter of immigrants.

Before coming to BACC I spent my entire professional career working towards nourishing and protecting the culture and narratives of our communities. Protected them from erasure.

It is not lost on me, that I protected our culture from the erasure caused by institutions like the one I now lead. I have now a rare opportunity to share my experience and to lead an organization which itself has a tremendous capacity to lead and create change from a non-performative and truly intentional place.

We know, in our team, that this journey into intentionality means challenging our very foundations. We know that this means rethinking what art conservation and cultural preservation has meant in the past, what it means now and what it has the capacity to mean. We know this means, committing to doing the hard work of repairing centuries worth of damage.

Practicing intentionality in creating access means approaching the communities we have left out in the past not with solutions in hand but with a vulnerability and openness to listen. To learn. To hold space. to pass the mic. To be open to hearing the painful truth. That we haven't done enough in the past. That we have excluded in the past. That we are not deserving of partnerships we have not nurtured. And then doing the work. Investing the resources, and nurturing them. To learn from communities what conservation and preservation looks like

outside of our institutions and expanding our current limited understanding to include that in our toolbox.

I apologize if what you expected to hear today was answers. or be given a roadmap to achieving equity, inclusion and diversity. We do not have one yet. We have so many questions. We have so many areas to work on. and we are engaging community partners to be critical and unforgiving leaders of that direction.

There are a couple of lessons we have learned along the way though,

The first, is that intention was not, is not enough. It is only the beginning.

Once we set out our intentions, we must follow them with intentionality. Make a plan and DO THE WORK.

Second, be wary of white saviorism. What does this mean? We're learning to resist the urge to approach communities we wish to engage as communities in deficit. In need of our expertise, and as if they are a problem to be solved, and we are the holders of the solution. White saviorism also takes the form of performative work. It is highly visible, superficial and is rarely indicative of real transformative change.

Earlier I mentioned the idea that opening the doors is not enough if we are not addressing the gates and walls around our institutions. The notion that we are at the center, that we are inside, and outside are masses of less privileged folks just dying to be let in is false. Consider that our house is actually not inhabitable and true inclusivity means not only opening up the doors and knocking down the walls and gates, but perhaps knocking down the house itself. dismantling our current institution and building a new one WITH input from everyone, a house that is truly inclusive is built for everyone, by everyone.

This leads us to the third lesson. Decenter. We are working to Imagine a world in which what we know is not the only Truth. Our methods and techniques. Our textbooks and our knowledge is created within our frame of reference. and that frame has the potential to be so so so much bigger.

Fourth, there is no perfect. There is no "our plan is finally ready to launch". Inclusion work is alive. It is growing and morphing, and will continue to grow with us. we'll try and we may not

always get it 100% right, we'll learn, we'll keep working to make it better. there will always be room to make it better. **It will never be perfect. but it will always be timely.**

Fifth, don't be afraid to ask for guidance and seek allies in this work. Seeking support and allyship is an important part of this process. The burden of dismantling institutional racism lies with the institutions, and we know that all of our institutions are complicit. We have to work together and tirelessly to achieve change, that includes partnering as conservation labs, museums, university departments, historical archives and so on. Partnering with each other, and partnering outside of our bubble. It has helped us tremendously to count on a strong circle of community allies, who are willing to hold us accountable and remind us of that responsibility, and when we fall short, gently point us in the right direction, because they see our commitment to see this through. If we can be such allies to you, reach out.

And lastly, there is also no immediate solution. systemic racism has existed in this country since 1492 and we've only apparently realized it was a problem in the 60's...so we have a centuries old problem to rectify on our hands and that will take time. The DEI work we do today, will reap benefits and hopefully create a truly inclusive field generations later. There is only one truth, and that is that the time to do that work is NOW.

Bio: Leticia Gomez Franco is an arts administrator, advocate and cultural producer. Her work is rooted in the intersection of culture, representation and social justice, all values that play a role in her new position as Executive Director of the Balboa Art Conservation Center. She most recently served as Senior Arts and Culture Funding Manager for the City of San Diego where she led the City's arts and culture funding program, oversaw the development and implementation of professional development, technical assistance and capacity building to incubate and build capacity of artists and arts and culture organizations and supported the departments diversity, equity and inclusion work. Before that, Gomez Franco served as Director of Programs for the New Americans Museum where she supported the grand reopening of the immigrant narratives based institution and led curatorial efforts. Her career in the arts began as Exhibitions Director for Casa Familiar's The Front: A Collaborative of Arts, Culture, Design & Urbanism, where she oversaw development and program management for multiple art spaces as well as headed a rigorous and culturally conscious exhibition calendar with a commitment to local arts, diversity and community empowerment. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley in English and Chicana/o Studies and a Master of Arts in Curatorial Theory from San Diego State University's Liberal Arts & Sciences Program. She is also a two-time fellow of the National Association of Latino Arts & Culture Leadership Institute (NALAC). lgomezfranco@bacc.org.

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