

arts profiles

Preparator takes crowbar to art exhibits

By John Carlos Villani
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"If I had to do anything besides making art, this would be it," Melissa Martinez says.

Her job title at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art is "preparator," meaning that without her expertise, SMOCA's sleek galleries would be bare walls and floors littered with crates.

In charge of installing the millions of dollars of cutting-edge art that rotates through the museum each year, Martinez works closely with SMOCA exhibit-designer Neil Borowicz. He determines the placement and flow of featured works, while Martinez and her staff of four uncrate the show, assemble it, place it, then ship it to its next destination when the run is over.

An artist herself, the graduate of Arizona State University's sculpture program has nearly completed a show of her own. "Desert Rumination," scheduled Feb. 9 to March 9 at reZurrection Gallery, 601 W. University Drive, Tempe, features 10 works inspired by Martinez's explorations in her studio and Arizona's deserts.

Although she fits the image of an ASU art grad in the initial phase of a rising career, Martinez, 26, is a far cry from the person typically working as a contemporary-art museum preparator, who's often older and male.

"Sometimes I feel like I should be introducing myself as a 40-year-old man," she says.

For a young woman to be SMOCA's preparator indicates two things: Martinez's highly developed skills and the Valley's tendency to offer top-shelf employment opportunities to young talent.

After graduating from ASU in 1999, Martinez worked at a bagel shop until the fateful day a friend informed her that SMOCA was hiring people for its installation crew.

"I really, really hated the bagel shop, so when I came to the museum that first day and found that nine hours went by in a flash, I



Russell Gates/The Arizona Republic

Preparator Melissa Martinez sets up an art exhibit by Maurizio Pellegrin.

knew this was the right place for me.

"This job requires you to be precise and always aware of your surroundings. One misplaced motion and you can destroy a work of art.

"You've also got to be able to take direction from the artists themselves, to get beyond the idea that these people are international art stars, and just be able to work intensely and carefully in following their instructions. It's like being part of the artist's team."

Each time an artist arrives at SMOCA to supervise the installation of his or her work, Martinez strives to get a sense of the artist's working style.

"Some of them just get off the plane, drive to the museum and, boom, they want to work for 24 hours and go like crazy," she says. "Others just hand you a book of instructions and go off sightseeing for a few hours, stopping in later to see if I have any questions.

"At first, they'll usually give me an odd look, and I can tell they're trying to decide if I'm up for the challenge of keeping pace with them. But once they see me operate a forklift, hang Sheetrock or use a crowbar on a crate, they realize I can get the job done, so they relax and we all get down to the work."

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