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Kathryn Kanjo named new director of Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



Kathryn Kanjo will become the new director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in October. (Pablo Mason / MCASD)

By **Carolina A. Miranda**

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Since 1983, director Hugh Davies has steered the [Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#) through exhibitions, expansions and off-site programming that has regularly engaged the city of San Diego and the communities that straddle the U.S.-Mexico border. But after more than three decades, he is preparing to hand the reins to MCASD deputy director Kathryn Kanjo, who will become the museum's director and CEO in October.

The shift in leadership comes at a time when the museum is in the early planning stages of a major renovation and expansion of its La Jolla location. (It also operates another pair of galleries in downtown San Diego.) The project, which is still in the quiet fundraising phase, will be designed by New York architect Annabelle Selldorf (who most recently was [the consulting architect](#) for downtown Los Angeles' mega gallery Hauser Wirth & Schimmel) and add 30,000 square feet of gallery space to better display

the museum's nearly 5,000-object collection in a more permanent fashion.

"I am coming in at a time in which we are planning for growth, so I think the continuity will be to my advantage," says Kanjo, who joined MCASD from the University Art Museum at UC Santa Barbara, where she served as director until 2010. "I want to continue our commitment to living artists even as we ready ourselves to showcase our historical holdings. So, one foot in art history and the other in the future."

Davies, a Francis Bacon scholar, will remain with MCASD until his contract expires in 2018. He'll oversee the capital campaign and building expansion.

"It focuses my purview and gives Kathryn the benefit of running the museum without having to worry about the capital campaign," he says. "It will give her time to get comfortable with the museum. I'll be reporting to the board and working closely with the building committee and the campaign committee."

Kanjo has served as MCASD's deputy director since 2010 — her second stint at the museum over the course of her career. In the 1990s, she worked as an assistant curator (1992-94) and associate curator (1994-95), helping produce "[La Frontera](#)," an exhibition related to the border, as well as shows by artists such as Leonardo Drew, Rita McBride and Jorge Pardo.

In the mid-1990s, she move to Oregon, to work as contemporary art curator at the Portland Art Museum. This was followed by a six-year stint as director of the esteemed Artpace in San Antonio. She returned to California in 2006, when she was hired by UC Santa Barbara.

Half a dozen years ago, Davies persuaded her to return to MCASD, where she joined as chief curator, before being promoted to deputy director. Kanjo says she was intrigued by the proposition of returning to San Diego — especially once the institution began to explore the idea of expanding.

"We have this collection that wants to see the light of day and has no physical space," she says. "We show it regularly but we don't show it steadily."

The museum, originally founded in 1941 as the Art Center in La Jolla, has a strong collection of post-World War II art that includes key pieces by color field painter Ellsworth Kelly, minimalist sculptor Donald Judd and renowned California installation artist Robert Irwin.

The institution drew critical raves for its ethereal show of California Light and Space artists (Irwin among them) during the first iteration of the Getty-funded Pacific Standard Time series in 2011. Times critic Christopher Knight described the show, which was titled "[Phenomenal](#)," as "beautiful and provocative."

MCASD has also regularly engaged artist communities across the border, organizing studio tours, staging solo and group exhibitions and adding key works by Tijuana artists to the permanent collection.

"We're 15 miles from Mexico," says Kanjo. "There are no collecting institutions of contemporary art in Tijuana, so we want to be mindful of collecting those artists and showing them."

Kanjo assumes command of the institution Oct. 18 — which is not only the 75th anniversary of the museum, it marks the birthday of Ellen Browning Scripps, whose Irving Gill-designed home serves as the heart of the institution's La Jolla compound.

Davies says the capital campaign for MCASD's renovation will be formally launched at that time, too. "Right now we're in the permitting stages," he says. "We have to pick a contractor. We have to get this approved by the Coastal Commission. There is a lot to do."

And while he is thrilled to see the renovation through its early stages, he says he is also looking forward to retirement — and to getting back to his work on Bacon, the Irish-born 20th century painter, whom he got to know personally as part of his research early on in his career. (Bacon died in 1992.)

"I want to get back to Bacon scholarship," he says. "I have a bunch of notebooks from my meetings with him that I've been wanting to pore over. I haven't done anything substantial, other than a couple of articles, over the last 40 years. It's time."

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