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ENLIVENING THE ARTS WORLD

FREDDY JANKA BRINGS AN OPTIMISTIC, INVIGORATING, AND
INCLUSIVE SPIRIT TO THE REBIRTH OF MCASB

BY ROGER DURLING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY INGRID BOSTROM

COVER STORY

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ALL SMILES: Freddy Janka is excited to be part of the new team at MCASB.

"Art is so important," Frederick Janka tells me in his typical fervent manner. "Art translates to options. When you have an experience with art, it supplies alternatives and solutions. It's important for youth to be exposed to art, for it offers exponential possibilities. Art saves lives."

Janka — or "Freddy," as he prefers to be addressed — has quietly and steadily become one of the most important figures in the art scene in Santa Barbara. In January, he joined forces with Arturo Heredia Soto (lead exhibition designer at UCSB's AD&A Museum, and cofounder of *Lum Art Magazine*), Debra Herrick (UCSB associate editorial director and cofounder and editor of *Lum Art Magazine*), and Lila Glasoe Francese (president of the Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation and CEO of OHI Home), and the four of them masterminded the rebirth of the venerable Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB).

MCASB, which was established in 1976 as the Contemporary Arts Forum (CAF), had always been the city's premier contemporary art-focused venue, and it abruptly closed its doors in August 2022 due to ongoing financial strains. "My style is to work collaboratively," says Freddy about coalescing this group to resuscitate MCASB and reopening its doors. "I'm very attentive to the larger ecosystem and believe strongly that we need to work together to elevate art in Santa Barbara."

Besides becoming the president of the board of MCASB and spearheading its rebirth, Freddy is the executive director of the Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation, a nonprofit in Ojai committed to supporting and advocating for the arts with initiatives that include awards for visual artists, a gallery space, and a collection of more than 250 works.

Furthermore, it facilitates The Ojai Institute, an artist-residency program that extends the dialogue between artists and the public through exhibitions and programs. Freddy is also the chair of the Arts Advisory Committee for the City of Santa Barbara and is a member of the Santa Barbara Advisory Board for KCRW.

I should disclose I have known Freddy since 2016. We both participated in a year-long leadership and renewal program for nonprofit executives in Santa Barbara called Courage to Lead. Ever since, we've had countless conversations over martinis, and I consider him to be a good friend. Most importantly, I have observed firsthand his metamorphosis from a sharp yet slightly tremulous emerging leader into the powerhouse that he is now. I greatly admire his tenacity and ingenuity. Not only does he have vast knowledge of the arts, but he is also intuitive and thoughtfully kindhearted.

Patsy Hicks, director of education of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, says, "It has been such a joy to witness Freddy evolve from having that initial youthful and joyful enthusiasm to achieving a creativity that is collaborative and that builds community." Hicks, who mentored Freddy when he was in high school, continues, "He pulls in a rich variety of voices and talents, each one of which brings not only individual skills but collective spirit rooted in place and identity. Because he is so open and welcoming, he makes things happen and everyone feels a part of the process. That is his magic. People WANT to work with him."

"The moment I found out that the museum [MCASB] was closing, I called the [previous] board president and proposed me taking over with a brand-new board," Freddy shares. "They asked for three-year projections and a program. We worked hard the last six months to prove to them that we're responsible."



HOME AGAIN: Freddy Janka strides by the back wall of MCASB, which currently features a 60-foot mural, "Nurture Our Mother," by Adriana Arriaga and Claudia Borfiga.

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COVER STORY



MCASB BOARD: From left, Vanessa Wallace Gonzales, Lila Glasoe Francese, Freddy Janka, Dalia Garcia, Debra Herrick, and Arturo Heredia Soto (not present: Adriana Arriaga)

For Freddy, reopening MCASB is very personal and a homecoming. "I showed my work here as a young student," he says. "In college I also curated my first show here." He was MCASB's director of development from 2014 until the 2017 departure of its former executive director, the highly respected Miki Garcia. Freddy expressed his desire to be her replacement, but unfortunately, he didn't have the support of the board of directors at the time. Things have now come full circle.

Freddy gets very passionate when speaking about the new plans for the museum. He tells me of the importance of working together with all arts organizations, arts leaders, and artists toward a more equitable arts ecology on the Central Coast. When I ask him to elaborate on this idea, his excitement grows as he explains, "A more equitable arts ecology looks like an art community where anyone, regardless of their background, has not only a fair chance at access but also at leadership and decision-making. This to me means ending historical patterns in gatekeeping, centering the needs of the most marginalized and hurt, as well as changing current systems of resource allocation."

He wants MCASB to showcase communities that haven't been previously given their due. "It's about refocusing," he tells me. "Focusing on Indigenous groups, Black, Latinx — redrawing the focus — ensuring that everyone has a piece of the pie."

A solo exhibit by Sarah Rosalena opens on April 9. She is a UCSB assistant professor of art in Computational Craft and Haptic Media, and a recipient of a Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation art prize. This is her first institutional solo exhibition, and she works in a very interesting intersection of Indigenous knowledge and space-age technology. Her works feature large-scale textiles woven with artificial intelligence technology. The show is called *Pointing Star*, for it references an eight-sided star shape or symbol that is found in every culture in Turtle Island (the name for Earth or North America, used by some Indigenous peoples).

The new MCASB is being run by seven board members and dozens of volunteers, and it's currently open from noon to 4 p.m., Thursday to Sunday. All board

members are required to work the front desk and welcome everyone. At the opening in January, there was an obvious excitement, as more than a thousand people showed up to see the new incarnation and show their support. "I'm shocked how many people walk in the door," Freddy exclaims.

Freddy and the board are also doing some serious training, with a crash course on board leadership and learning the best practices for sound board management. They're also wrapping their heads around what kind of executive director MCASB needs. When I ask Freddy why he doesn't step into that role, he replies, "My role at MCASB is to support and nurture the upcoming executive director. I will be a better resource for that person rather than becoming it. You want to nurture the ED. That's an important job for an institution."

Besides amalgamating the powerful museum board, which includes forces from the aforementioned *Lum Art Magazine* and the Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation, Freddy has brought in the SBCC Atkinson Gallery (his husband, John Connelly, is the director) to cooperate with MCASB on a project called *Scientificas Indigenas/Indigenous Scientists*, which will take place October 2024 through February 2025, with an exhibition at MCASB and a lab component and select art works at Atkinson Gallery.

He is also working with the Santa Barbara Museum of Art to do a first institution solo show of artist Janna Ireland, who happens to be another Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation art prize winner. Patsy Hicks comments on this alliance: "I can say that happily there is precedent here with the museum partnering with MCASB over the years. It takes planning and generous flexibility to make collaborations like this happen. It is exciting when it does. It positions Santa Barbara's commitment to supporting and fostering the arts vibrantly front and center."

A Santa Barbaran to the core, Frederick Janka was born at Cottage Hospital. His dad, Gary, was a corporate consultant who always had a passion for Buddhism and eventually became a Zen Buddhist priest. Freddy recalls his dad always speaking about the similarities

between all the religions. Freddy's mom, Gloria, whose father was born in Mexico, worked at Sears for 39 years — starting in the candy department and ending at the hardware department. As a young married couple, Freddy's parents lived in Twentynine Palms until Gary was accepted to UCSB, and they moved to Santa Barbara.

Both of his parents spoke limited Spanish around the house. "Where we came from was really important, but we weren't totally immersed in Mexican culture," Freddy says. "I would make cascarrones as a kid."

While growing up on the Mesa in Santa Barbara, it was hard for him to feel pride about his heritage. It was all about fitting in. He attended Santa Barbara Junior High and Santa Barbara High — and as an SBHS student, he took painting at SBCC with Rafael Perea de La Cabada, who introduced him to Mexican Modernism. But Freddy left high school early after he had taken all his senior required courses during his junior year and did an exchange in Marseille, France, from 1999 to 2000, where he took art classes. He stayed with a very cultured French family who were into film and introduced him to French cinema and talent like Catherine Breillat.

"I was always into art," he reminisces. "My parents were always encouraging. They knew that having that opportunity with art was so important. In junior high, I'd ask my dad to take me down to L.A. for art classes at Los Angeles County Museum of Art and to see exhibitions. They saw it was something I loved and that I was good at."

Freddy went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (a top fine arts school) and graduated in 2004. He went to college already equipped with a portfolio. "I was organizing 'apartment shows' while in college," he divulges. "I started to realize I was having more fun organizing and showcasing artists than creating. It was an incredibly formative experience. It was the first time I encountered artists like Félix González-Torres and Gerhard Richter, Georges Seurat, and Georgia O'Keeffe."

During his last year of college, Freddy visited the Armory Show in New York, which brings the world's leading international contemporary and modern art galleries to the city once a year. There he met Nina Menocal who ran her art gallery in Mexico City. She hired him as the gallery curator before he even graduated from college.

"What was crazy was that I didn't speak Spanish," he recalls. "I had always been able to understand, but I had to figure out how to communicate with my co-workers and artists." He stayed in Mexico until 2007. There was a time in 2006 he was curating independently in N.Y.C., Mexico, and Santa Barbara. In N.Y.C., a friend had a gallery in Harlem (Mambo Jumbo) and wanted an exhibit of Mexican artists. In Santa Barbara, he co-curated the Off Access Biennial.

While in Miami during the art fairs, he met his future husband, John



SOLO SHOW: Artist Sarah Rosalena's first solo institutional exhibition opens on April 9.

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HAPPY GUY: "I'm pleased to be the first gay and Latinx board president of MCSAB — and also Santa Barbara-born," says Freddy Janka.

Connelly. "We hated each other at first," Freddy confesses. "I thought he was an asshole. He thought I was loud and obnoxious."

They moved to N.Y.C. in the spring of 2007. Freddy was applying for jobs, but it was difficult to break into the New York art world. He started curating jobs for Connelly and eventually started working for the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) for three years. Freddy then worked for the Sculpture Center in Long Island City as their associate director. Fatefully, Miki Garcia organized a dinner in Miami in 2007 at the Art Fair. There, Freddy met Carolyn Glasoe Bailey. In 2012, Freddy and John got married in Ojai at Carolyn's home, and she lured him into coming back to Santa Barbara in 2014 to become the director of development at MCASB. Bailey even gave the couple a car.

"We shared a love of food, wine, art, and martinis," says Freddy about his impactful friendship with Bailey. "We'd have these epic dinners and talk about art."

Bailey helped launch the careers of many noteworthy Minnesota artists. Her commitment to educating art collectors led to the birth of many museum quality art collections. Her sister Lila Glasoe Francese recalls, "Carolyn had done so much in her 46 years of life, and I asked her one day, when she knew she was terminal, if there was anything she wished she would have done. She said, 'Yes, I wish I had started an art foundation.'"

In one of the many chats between Freddy and Bailey, they also spoke about what was missing in the area artistically. Freddy remembers them talking about creating an artist residence in Ojai. "She was always hosting artists," he says. "She saw what the Ojai Playwrights Conference was doing."

Bailey died on November 16, 2015, after a lengthy battle with glioblastoma brain cancer. "When I asked Carolyn who should run her foundation," recalls Francese, "she actually responded with 'Freddy.' She saw in him the ability to be a leader in the world of art. I have watched Freddy cultivate incredible partnerships with individual donors as well as large institutions. He has an enormous understanding of practice when it comes to dealing with artists."

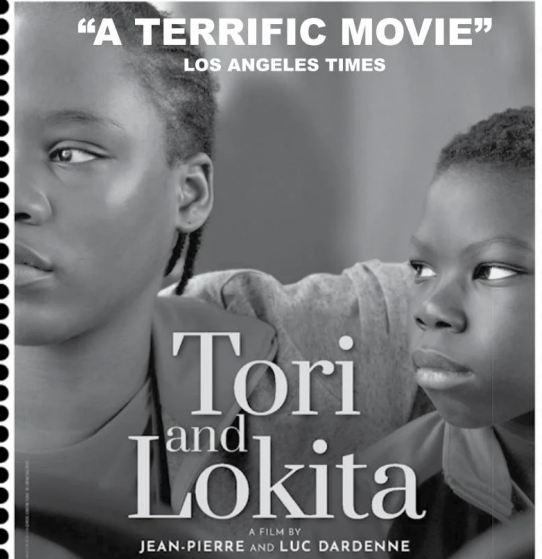
"Santa Barbara has had a very important art history," voices Freddy, "and we are building on it. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA in New York) has, since the '70s, been connected to the global arts scene. It predates L.A.'s MOCA. Santa Barbara had an arts space before L.A. had MOCA. What is amazing about the Santa Barbara arts scene is that there are so many artists here. It's a community that has been built on a love for art and culture. We're living in a moment in which there's a decentralization of the art world. THINGS are happening outside N.Y.C. and L.A. We have to balance the expectations of our regional community and the larger scene. Santa Barbara is such a unique, beautiful community — all roads lead to it."

Many of us were concerned when MCASB closed its doors because we thought the arts scene in Santa Barbara would be hurting for a long time. Thanks to Freddy Janka, we can now rest easy that the arts are now going to take full center stage.

As I leave my last meeting with Freddy, I ask him if there's anything else he'd like to add or emphasize. He smiles broadly and says, "I'm pleased to be the first gay and Latinx board president of MCSAB — and also Santa Barbara-born."

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