



## MCA Santa Barbara Honors Talented Artists in a Night of Celebration and Community

Visionary Artists Mary Heebner, Dr. Joann Kuchera-Morin, Gabriela Ruiz, Manjari Sharma, and Diana Thater Were Feted at a Special 'Myths and Legends' Event



By Alice Dehghanzadeh

Fri Jul 18, 2025 | 2:10pm



Honorees at MCASB's 2025 Art Awards, July 13, 2025 | Photo: Ingrid Bostrom

Creativity and innovation were celebrated at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara's (MCASB) 2025 Art Awards. On July 13, people from across the county gathered to recognize the five talented and outstanding artists. Guests donned their most legendary looks as they ascended the iconic tile staircase in Paseo Nuevo.

The event, with a theme of "myths and legends," began with a reception at the museum where guests could meet the artists and ask them about their work. This was held in the galleries with the *Arte del Pueblo* exhibition on view, featuring works of all types from artists across the region.



*Board and staff members at MCASB's 2025 Art Awards, July 13, 2025 | Photo: Ingrid Bostrom*

Following the reception, guests were guided into the Center Stage Theater for a screening of Dr. Joann Kuchera-Morin's *Probably/Possibly?* The film features footage from the AlloSphere at UCSB, where Kuchera-Morin leads the team and is the chief designer, as well as professor in the Department of Music.

After the screening, MCASB Board of Trustees President Frederick Janka and Executive Director Dalia Garcia presented the awards to Kuchera-Morin, Mary Heebner, Mary Heebner, Gabriela Ruiz, Manjari Sharma, and Diana Thater. The awards themselves were created by Ry Rocklen, an American sculptor who focuses on themes of pursuing the sublime in the things we take for granted.

The evening also featured a dinner catered by the downtown Indian restaurant Bibi Ji.

"I feel like we need to be more loud and take space when it comes to the arts, and one of the main things for us is looking for ways in how we can emphasize and how we can support local artists, and how we can host events that kind of have more integral meanings of inclusivity in the arts," said Garcia.

Heebner shared that she thinks "an artist takes many years to find her voice, and also that [they] take many years to find [their] place in a community." She went on to say, "I'm happy to move that forward and celebrate not only the work that I've done, but other artists and people in the community that make this place so special. These awards mark a moment in time; they mark a moment in someone's individual development, how they are regarded by the community, and how they are both nourished and give back to the community."



Honoree Manjari Sharma at MCASB's 2025 Art Awards, July 13, 2025 | Photo: Ingrid Bostrom



"[MCASB is] opening up the doors to everyone," said Kuchera-Morin, "which is really important for museums, because they have not been open to everyone, and here, they're looking at all the artists that actually create in many different cultures. I think to acknowledge who we are and bring us together as one community is really important."

*Inside the gallery at MCASB's 2025 Art Awards, July 13,  
2025 | Photo: Ingrid Bostrom*

Ruiz, who is originally from Los Angeles but familiar with Santa Barbara, as her dad lived here during her childhood, shared that she has a soft spot for Santa Barbara and that these awards are “so special.” When asked about the role of community in the arts, she said, “These awards are not only important because they recognize artists, but they show that the artists can also work with the community. Artists are successful in what they do when their community shows up, but it’s also important for the artist to show up for the community.”

Sharma, a Mumbai-born and Los Angeles-based artist, said, “The age-old question is, ‘What does an artist do?’ I’ve done it my whole life now, but when it comes down to really showing someone what you’re doing, you need a canvas; you need a space that can bring your art there so people can walk up to the conversation. A place like MCA, which is in the heart of Santa Barbara, allows people to really connect as opposed to — the world today is like doomscrolling and AI. Art makes it real; it brings community closer.”

Thater, a Los Angeles-based artist who recently lost her home and studio to the area fires, emphasized that these awards “lift[ed her] spirits. It is wonderful to be recognized for my work. These awards introduce artists to the community, which is important. And, of course, the museum is involved with all kinds of artists, and you see that the people who receive this award today come from all different places both personally and professionally. I think it’s important to recognize artists because for so long, we work so hard, and if you get to be famous or if you are with a good gallery, you’re lucky, but you’re especially lucky to be recognized by an institution for your work.”



*Inside the gallery at MCASB's 2025 Art Awards, July 13, 2025 | Photo: Ingrid Bosstrom*