

Ask a Curator

An Interview with Jadira Gurulé, curator
at the
NHCC Art Museum

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NATIONAL HISPANIC CULTURAL CENTER
ART MUSEUM



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About Jadira



As Exhibition Curator, Jadira Gurulé works with the Visual Arts team, artists, and community members to plan exhibitions for the Art Museum. She began her relationship with the Museum as a volunteer and intern in 2008 and became the exhibition curator in 2016. Gurulé received her MA in American Studies from the University of New Mexico in 2015 where she studied Visual Culture with an emphasis on race, gender, identity, and culture which are themes that continue to influence her work. She has curated recent exhibitions at the NHCC Art Museum such as *Because It's Time: Unraveling Race and Place in NM* (2018) which examined identity and experience from a variety of perspectives in New Mexico, and *Qué Chola* (2019) which celebrated la Chola as a symbol of feminine strength in Chicana/o, Latinx, and Native art.

1. What was your path to becoming a curator? Tell us a little about your background and the choices you've made that have led you to this career.

As a child, I had an appreciation for art and creative expression. My first-grade teacher taught our class about her favorite artist, Vincent Van Gogh, and had us make our own versions of his famous painting, *Starry Night*. This exercise opened up an appreciation in young me and I began to try drawing at home and started paying attention to the world around me differently. I looked at the trees and started to notice new details and colors in the leaves, I noticed art in our home and picked apart billboards while riding in the car. I wondered, what made something interesting to look at? What made something beautiful? What messages was the artist trying to send to me? Did everyone see things the way I did?

When I got to college, I started taking art history classes as part of my studies. I had many interests and contemplated majors in psychology, dance, gender studies, and journalism. However, art history classes always piqued my interest most and I started to learn more about the types of jobs that would allow me to work with art.

During one semester, a professor sent us to visit an exhibition about revolutionary art from Latin America at the National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum. I fell in love with the museum and the art and decided I would reach out to volunteer as a docent and learn how to give tours to visitors in the museum.

Soon, I changed my major to art history and became an intern at the museum. After finishing my first degree, and a few years of learning through hands-on work at the museum, I decided to go back to school for another degree. This time, I entered an American Studies program where I studied art and other visual culture with a focus on how culture and identity impact the art that we make and the way we see the world around us. After graduating a second time, I was hired as a curator for the NHCC Art Museum.

2. Tell us about some of your more formative museum experiences, how have they shaped you as a person and as a curator?

I have had so many meaningful visits to museums that it's hard to choose just one! But one of my favorites was a visit to the Oakland Museum of California to visit the exhibition, *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50* in 2017. This exhibition had an amazing blend of art, historical materials, interactive opportunities, and creative design that was incredibly engaging and thought-provoking. I visited on a day when a number of school groups were also in attendance and it was great to experience and learn from the content myself but also watch the way children engaged with the ideas. Overall, I thought the exhibition did a great job of telling an important story about community organizing and activism, especially because it is a story that has, at times, been mischaracterized throughout history. It was so cool seeing the work of the Black Panthers presented in an accessible way for the next generation.

3. What does it mean to you to be a curator?

There is a lot that goes into the work of being a curator and I think that this role probably means different things to different curators. Personally, what being a curator means to me has changed and grown over time as I learn more and meet people with perspectives that differ from mine; I hope that this will always be the case. However, right now, one thought that keeps rising to the surface is that an important part of being a curator is about bringing people and ideas together, to create space for perspectives and stories that are often overlooked, and to develop learning experiences that can build mutual understanding and respect.

4. How would you describe your curatorial process?

Every exhibit is different and often takes on a life of its own. This means that different needs or “curatorial processes” may arise depending on the vision for an exhibition and who is involved. I think an important part of this process includes an open and flexible approach that can allow an exhibition to change as new ideas come up. Overall, however, the early stages of planning an exhibition can involve similar processes such as noticing trends in art, developing an overarching idea for an exhibition, then considering what artists and community members might want to participate, and then letting it grow from there.

5. What are some of the challenges you face as a curator?

The challenges that may arise for a curator during the planning of an exhibition can change a lot depending on the project. Sometimes challenges include things such as figuring out the timeline for a project, working with team members to agree on which ideas to move forward with, and making sure that the proper resources are available for the project. In other instances, a curator may find themselves facing harder challenges that raise more questions than answers. For example, maybe someone doesn't like the exhibit and wants it to be changed. In a case like this, the museum team might find themselves asking, “how do we create space for these concerns to be heard?” “How can we best understand this concern?” “What should be the next steps?” In cases like this, each challenge will be unique and require open, thoughtful, and creative solutions.

6. What is interpretation? What do you hope to achieve through your interpretation?

While talking about what “interpretation” means in a museum context may seem simple, it is anything but! A dictionary definition of “interpretation” is the “explained meaning of something.” While this definition is simple in some ways, there is a lot more to consider about what interpretation is as well as how interpretation in a museum is created and how it functions.

In museums, curators often provide interpretive content or information about artworks in the museum. This information might be presented in text that is placed near a work of art. It might include information about an artwork such as where and when it was created and what was happening in the world at the time. This content could also include information about the artist that created the artwork. In some cases, interpretive content may also talk about certain aspects of an artwork such as

symbols or cultural references that are contained within it. Any and all of this information could be considered part of the “interpretation” of an artwork and it is all aimed at helping the viewer understand the meaning of the artwork.

While this might seem like a straight-forward presentation of facts about an artist and artwork, the interpretation of facts is often subjective, meaning that it is often influenced by a particular person or group’s unique perspective. Interpretation can change depending on the different experiences a person has had, their familiarity with a particular subject, and the opinions and perspectives of those around them. However, this doesn’t mean that factual information doesn’t exist, it means that there is a lot to consider around how the information is presented, who is presenting it, and what other ways it could be understood.

With this in mind, it becomes ok to consider interpretation presented by a curator in the museum as one, but not necessarily the only way, to “read” or understand what you are seeing in the museum.

Here are some questions that can be useful in this area:

What do I see in this artwork?

What does it make me think of?

Can I see the story told?

Do I identify with the story being told?

And then, How does my interpretation compare to the artist’s intent? How does my interpretation compare and contrast with what the curator or the object label says? Does it feel like anything is missing? Why might that be?

This experience doesn’t have to be about finding the right answer. It can be about considering your own perspective alongside perspectives that might be different. It can be about enjoying seeing artwork in many different ways.

7. What has been your favorite exhibit to curate and why?

Every exhibit I have curated has been my favorite in the moment. With each new exhibit, lessons from the previous exhibitions are brought into it; it feels like each process is a growing process, which is really exciting. I have had so many meaningful moments working with artists and community members and each of these moments occupies a special place in my memory

8. What is your dream exhibition?

It’s hard to pick one dream exhibition as each one becomes its own kind of magic. The dream I have for all exhibitions that I participate in creating is that they become useful and welcoming learning spaces where visitors of all backgrounds and experiences feel comfortable coming together to appreciate the creative labor of the artists and to learn something new that might help us all see the world we live in a little differently than we did before.

9. What is your responsibility to the community that you serve? How do you go about serving your community?

From my perspective, a museum's whole responsibility is to the communities it serves. This responsibility takes on many forms within the function of a museum, from representation, accessibility, educational opportunity, etc., to being a safe place for important historical and cultural artworks and artifacts to live and be available for generations to come. The specific responsibilities might look different depending on the museum.

However, there is a great deal of complexity in all facets of how a museum and/or a curator go about serving a community. At a basic level, this might include a consideration of how community is defined and thinking about the many communities that make up those who come to the museum for a visit or those who are represented within the museum itself. For example, the NHCC Art Museum shows artworks that are created by artists from many different countries and welcomes visitors from many different places and cultural backgrounds. While these artists and visitors are part of the community that interacts with the NHCC, they are also a part of many other communities and have had different experiences as individuals. In this area, it is also important to consider who isn't coming for a visit and why might that be?

I think it's also important to think about how the needs of any given community may change over time. The relationship between a museum and those it serves requires continued commitment, engagement and willingness to adjust.

10. How do you see the role of curator evolving in the future?

I don't think there is now, nor will there be in the future, one way of doing this work. I do think it is important to note contemporary discussions regarding the role of curators and museums in shaping ideas about the world around us. The role of museums, and in particular the work of curators and educators within museums, in contemporary social justice efforts across the nation is a significant topic of discussion at the moment. I think that museums will continue to see a public desire for museums to engage with these issues and be willing to change and meet the needs of the communities they serve in new ways. These are exciting times to be a part of a museum and to participate in the important work that they do. If there is anything to learn from this moment and carry into the future, it is that there is always work to be done and room to grow.