

## deFINE Success

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA 02.27.13



Left: Artists Angel Otero and Jack Whitten. Right: Isolde Brielmaier, chief curator of the Savannah College of Art and Design, with Kathryn Kanjo, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

**SAVANNAH, GEORGIA MAY BE BEST KNOWN** as a crime scene—and what environment could be more hospitable to art? The society murder that inspired *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* took place in just one of this port city’s historic homes. The Savannah College of Art and Design has gone the book and film several times better by absorbing and restoring almost eighty buildings, each with a story of its own.

Several came into focus last week during SCAD’s fourth annual deFINE ART, a supremely well-organized festival of exhibitions, performances, and talks. The most impressive venue was the school’s airy tunnel of an 82,000 square-foot museum. Erected on the footprint of an antebellum train depot, architect Christian Sottile seamlessly incorporated what remains of the now-landmarked brick ruin into the museum’s recent concrete-and-glass expansion. Even if you don’t know that slaves made the bricks, the walls look poignant.

They spoke volumes last Tuesday evening, when SCAD held a reception for the visiting artists, students, faculty, and other college personnel attending deFINE ART’s opening. Invited by exhibitions director Laurie Ann Farrell to moderate an upcoming panel, I arrived just in time to see Jack Whitten emerge from what Jennifer Rubell instantly characterized as, “The single best talk by an artist that I have ever heard.” That assessment found favor with Angel Otero, another of the thirteen artists with exhibitions or solo projects on view during the week.



Left: Artist Odili Donald Odita. Right: SCAD Museum director of exhibitions Laurie Ann Farrell with SCAD fine art dean Steve Bliss.

Each show at the museum transported us into the next. Whitten’s *Erasures*—works on paper and canvas from the 1970s—were all about removing historical references from his art in favor of invention and

experimentation. “The seventies were good to me,” said the seventy-three-year-old artist. Better than the eighties, I thought, when Gerhard Richter’s squeegee paintings began zooming to the top of the market—years after the rudely marginalized Whitten made his. Perhaps the retrospective coming to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego next year will be a corrective. “It’s going to be tough to whittle down all the great Whittens to just seventy-eight works,” said Kathryn Kanjo, the retrospective’s curator.

We stopped in front of drawings from 1974 that Whitten made with copy-machine toner. I wondered if Wade Guyton had seen them. Whitten noted that the variety of techniques he employed back then stemmed partly from the handmade papers he discovered through his wife, Mary, a paper conservator. “Paper taught me a lot,” he said.

“There seems to be a common thread of materiality running through these shows,” observed Isolde Brielmaier, SCAD’s chief curator. That was true of Otero’s abstract canvases, made with dried sheets of poured oil paints that look like wrinkled fabrics on the finished products. And Rubell’s participatory installation, *Free*, supplied scrumptious biscuits to those who dared enter her pitch-black homage to a Donald Judd box and edge their way to a glowing altar dripping local honey.

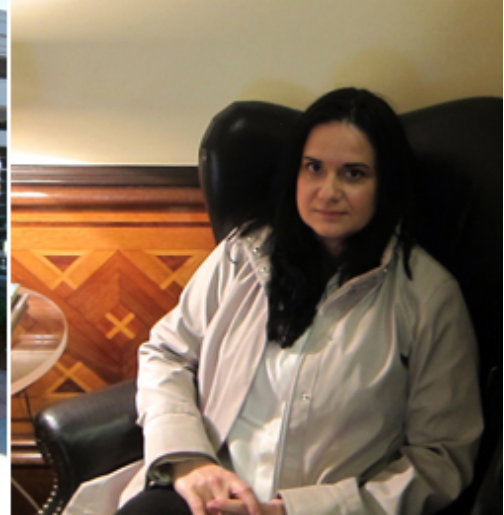


Left: LACMA director and CEO Michael Govan, Witte de With director and curator Defne Ayas, and Studio Museum director and chief curator Thelma Golden. Right: Artist Ingrid Calame.

Ingrid Calame, meanwhile, needed a hazmat suit to escape the dust that her commissioned, graffiti-like wall painting, *Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Pit #4, #9, #7*, raised during its making. Rosemarie Fiore burned firecrackers to get the fumage effect of her paintings; Odili Donald Odita relied on Michelangelo-style scaffolding for the weeks it took him to paint his *Heaven’s Gate* on the walls and ceiling of the museum’s lobby. I don’t know what hoops Damián Ortega jumped through to bring the stacked, mirrored, and hinged cubes of his *Belo Horizonte Project* to a hall running the length of the building, but I can’t imagine that it could ever look more breathtaking anywhere else.

My senses on full alert, I reached SCAD’s Gutstein Gallery, opposite its movie theater. Inside, Dallas-based artist Gabriel Dawe had strung two spectral—and spectrum-crossing—thread sculptures between the columns of a space that had once been a department store lunch counter where 1960s Civil Rights workers staged sit-ins.

Still reeling from this mashup of history and color, I was shown to dinner at SCAD’s Poetter Hall, the former armory that was the school’s first building. (With its lime-green banister and alumni paintings on the walls, it looks nothing like an armory now.) There I met Paula Wallace, the former elementary school teacher who co-founded SCAD and is still its president, and Dr. Walter Evans, whose donation of seventy works from their extensive holdings of African-American art formed the core of the museum’s permanent collection. Later on I discovered that Evans also has a startling library that has made him the go-to guy for scholars of African American letters, while Whitten, in his spare time, is an authority on the catching, cooking, and eating of octopus.



Left: Dealers Julia Fischbach and Emanuel Aguilar. Right: Artist Rosemarie Fiore.

This is why encounters outside more established centers of the art world can be so edifying. The conversations are different than they are in market-mad New York. The following day, an artists' panel aimed at students was all about how to get a career going, as might be expected. But the three panelists—Otero, Calame, and Savannah-based Marcus Kenney—also talked about the conflict of relationships that results from being an artist and a parent at the same time. That is one subject I've never known to come up at any symposium I've attended before.

By Thursday, when I met up with my panel of museum directors—Michael Govan, Thelma Golden, and Defne Ayas—I had visited the other SCAD galleries; paged through letters by James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, and Toussaint L'Ouverture at Dr. Evans's house, along with books signed by Langston Hughes to the likes of Duke Ellington; and walked through a few of Savannah's twenty-two garden squares. "You don't have to be in any one place to be an artist," Otero had said. But it does help to get around, to see how art travels, and what it does when it lands.

— *Linda Yablonsky*



Left: Artist Jason Hackenworth. Right: SCAD president and co-founder Paula Wallace with collector Ann Tenenbaum.