

## Meet Up

# Leading the way for innovative art

By Sue McAllister

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### BACK STORY

CATHY KIMBALL

The San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art is taking a deep breath and savoring some past — and present — accomplishments. Among them, the institute is celebrating 30 years of bringing innovative art to the South Bay. Under the leadership of executive director Cathy Kimball, it now attracts more than 20,000 visitors a year, compared with about 8,000 a decade ago. The institute launched a fine-art printmaking center that offers workshops as well as studio time for working artists. Through late February, all three gallery spaces in the building will host works by local artist Tony May. Titled "Old Technology," the exhibit nonetheless "has more electronic stuff running along the tops of the walls and through the walls than any show we've ever done," says Kimball, who has led the institute since 2000.

She spoke with us recently. Here are excerpts from the conversation.

**Q** What does it mean for the ICA to have reached its 30th year?

**A** There's persistence and perseverance, but I don't really like to dwell on the celebration of getting to 30, because it almost implies we did it despite ourselves, and we didn't. We've been on this incredibly good run for the past decade. I would assume we're going to be around for another 30, if we're being responsive to the community and we're listening to our audience and being relevant and somewhat provocative and challenging.

**Q** ICA campaigned to get actor/artist Steve Martin to come to the 30th annual auction, admitting that you had "a snowball's chance in hell" of persuading him. He sent you something to auction instead.

**A** This box arrives, and inside is a Chinese takeout box, and it's signed by him. The box is painted with fire, and there is a Styrofoam ball covered in shiny glitter with red tinsel around it. So it's a snowball in hell, right? It was the most appropriate, hysterical, thoughtful

response we could ever have imagined him doing.

**Q** Did you auction off the box open or closed?

**A** We sold it that night, closed, for \$3,000.

**Q** What do you say to people who feel intimidated by contemporary art?

**A** There are no wrong answers in contemporary art. You see what you see, and it's valid.

**Q** If you could start over, what would you want to be?

**A** A math scholar. It's not a topic I ever cared about, but now I see artists who are mathematicians who are just brilliant. And the other thing, when I was a kid I wanted to be the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

**Q** How did you get interested in art?

**A** Both my parents are fine art lovers. My dad worked right across from the Museum of Modern Art (in New York), so as a kid I would go in on the train, he'd meet me and we would have lunch in the MOMA sculpture garden, the old one, and then tour around the museum. Art was always something I saw as a treat.

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