

On curating



Curator Erin Christovale discusses what it means to be a curator on practical, emotional, and intellectual levels.

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As told to Samantha Ayson, 2996 words.

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Can you tell us about when you first knew that you wanted to be a curator?

I have a roundabout answer because I had a roundabout experience of becoming a curator. I went to USC for film school, but I was originally a business major. I was failing one of my classes so I really had to have a conversation with my parents where I was like, "I'm unhappy." I wrote an essay about *Paris is Burning* for the film school and I got in. I was in the critical studies program, which is basically where you watch movies all the time, talk about them, and then you write about them.

So it was the complete opposite of business school.

It's also a different type of work. It's critical thinking at its peak—which I really enjoy. I did film school and was interested in it, but was also thinking about USC and its relationship to the entertainment industry and what that trajectory would be for a critical studies person and I was like, "I don't want to be a PA for someone for 10 years!"

My senior year, I took a video art class in the art school and I was like, "This is interesting. Really experimental. This is what I'm interested in." So from there, after I graduated, me and some friends formed an art collective and I took on the film programming bit. I was basically teaching myself how to be a film programmer and using our collective to do shows, screenings, and make zines. After that, I worked for a few film festivals. I worked for the L.A. Film Festival for a bit and then the moment was actually when I did my first show at MoCADA in Brooklyn. They had a call out for a guest curator.



Erin Christovale in conversation with Cauleen Smith

At the time, I was thinking a lot about my family who lives just outside of New Orleans and about the sort of ongoing effects of Hurricane Katrina, so I pitched this all-film video show called *a/wake in the water: Meditations on Disaster*, which was looking at how various communities within the African diaspora deal with natural disasters or environmental racism and how those two things can play off of each other. Just thinking about a lack of response from the National Guard and the slowness of it, who had to leave that space, how New Orleans has been forever changed by that, and how culture is impacted. That was my first show and it felt really good and I was like, "I want to do this." So from there, I started curating. I still do my film programs and exhibitions, but I don't really see them as different things. They're all just sort of the thoughts in my brain that spit out in different avenues.

Do you make art? Or have you ever tried to?

I took Video Art 101 and we had the opportunity to make a few pieces. We had to take a few production classes in the film school, but that doesn't mean that I won't ever make art. I don't know.

Art means so many different things to so many different people that within the context of contemporary art, I don't think I will ever make art objects, but I consider curation as an extension of art-making or creative-making. I also know that right now I'm curating and that's what I want to focus on. When my body and my mind tells me it's time to make that shift, I'll go for it.

Even though you don't necessarily make art, you have to make yourself vulnerable when you're a curator, too.

With every creative process, there's that moment of incubation, research, putting some feelers out, then there's that moment where you give birth, and then there's that moment where you see the child walk for the first time and you're like, "You can live in the world without me. You can circulate." That's really special.



Erin Christovale on the coast near Big Sur. Photo by Savannah Wood.

What would you say are your priorities as a curator?

My first priority is taking care of myself, and that's a priority that I'm just starting to really understand. Mental health is important and I think the past year, for everyone, has been difficult on a lot of levels. I was going through a lot of personal things, and having those coincide with this major biennial was difficult. It made me aware of how important it is for me to take care of myself and figure out what that means: 15-minute meditations in the morning, hiking, being with my family, really simple things that are therapeutic for me.

Is there a specific framework that you follow when you first begin a project?

When ideas come to me, they hit me really hard and I'm struck by them. Sometimes I have to learn how to turn my brain off because I'll spiral, but when I do that with an idea, I know that it's sticking. I'll usually spiral for a week, step away from it for a month, then I'll come back and be like, "What makes sense?" When I come back to it a month later and it still makes sense then I'll usually go for it. Then it's just research, talking to friends, and reading recommendations. I'll usually take my ideas on hikes. I really enjoy solo hikes for that reason because that's a place where I can process. Then I start to put it out in the world.

How do you learn about new artists?

Social media plays a lot into that. I follow other curators and art people. Work just pops up. If I'm interested, I'll look into it. This past year has been really interesting just because of *Made in L.A.* and how we organized that. We did over 200 studio visits in and around the city. Sometimes we'd show up to studio visits with artists who we love, and whose work we know. Or, sometimes we'd just show up totally unaware and ready to explore what a new artist is doing. Those are often the really surprising studio visits. We met some people who shocked us, in terms of, "How is that person not on our radar?"

I'm also dedicated to some of the smaller art spaces in the city. The William Grant Still Arts Center, which is interested in not just their archive, but in local archives. I really love The Mistake Room and Cesar [Garcia]'s vision in thinking about the Global South and also thinking about how L.A. is an extension of Latin America. I'm also interested in Commonwealth and Council. For years, Young [Chung] has been cultivating this space that is very intentional—both in terms of the artists he shows, but also in terms of how he supports them, in every sense of that word. I appreciate gallerists who have a moral standing in all of that.

You find out about other artists through people you know in some way, but how do you learn about artists you aren't familiar with? Are more artists coming to you now that you're a curator at a museum?

I think what is really interesting about the art world is that it generates all of these social spaces, but we're all actually working in those spaces, too. Some of these gray areas aren't really clear as to like, is this a personal thing or is this a work thing? I don't like folks who come up to me with their phone and show me their work, but I appreciate people who want to reach out. I'm always at the Hammer, so I'm always down to get a coffee and get to know someone. I also appreciate artists who have actually looked at my curatorial trajectory and understand what I'm interested in, and then ask themselves, "Does this actually make sense for me to approach this curator?" Because sometimes it doesn't.



Still from *The Golden Chain* by Buki Bodunrin and Ezra Clayton Daniels, 2013. The work was part of short film program *Black Radical Imagination 2013*, curated by Erin Christovale and Amir George.

How do you decide that you want to start working with someone?

If their work blows my mind and it's in line with what I'm interested in. I come from a camp of Afrofuturism as my foundation and that was really where a lot of my curatorial background started. I have this ongoing film program called [*Black Radical Imagination*](#). Every year it shifts, but it's a program of short experimental films made by artists and filmmakers in the African diaspora that me and my friend Amir travel with and show all over. I've just always been interested in Afrofuturism as a point of departure.

One thing that I think about whenever I go to exhibitions is how video work is being presented. Since you have that experience with *Black Radical Imagination*, what are the challenges to presenting video work in a gallery versus in a space created specifically for showing film?

I've learned a lot about that, because that first exhibition I did was all film and video, and the gallery was a big rectangle. I was like, "What the fuck? How am I going to do this?" But it's a challenge that I'm invested in, and I love when video is done right. I think it's just about giving the work breathing room. Moving image requires so much of your attention and wants to be seen and wants to live with you, so just give it that. It also depends on the work. What it really comes down to is having conversations with artists and asking, "How do you want this work to be seen? What scale do you want it to be in?" Something I was interested in with the *a/wake in the water* show is how one of the artists, Tameka Norris, had this piece about Katrina where she was in this massive lake and she had this plastic bin that she was holding onto because she didn't know how to swim. The piece was about her struggling, but what was really beautiful was that when people walked into the space, their shadows were actually projected into that and it was this bodily way of relating to the work.

Sometimes it may not even be worth showing the work if the technology in the space isn't right. Nothing is sadder than a shitty projection when you want the work to be sharp and to make a point.

Do you ever think about how the work you do will be shared online or on social media?

All the time. Social media is related to work for so many of us. Every December, I'll take a social media break. I don't like it really, and again, kind of talking about how my brain spirals, I will get caught in feeds for hours. I am trying to limit myself on social media this year, but I think it's really interesting how there's this model for emerging curators to be so invested in social media, and for that to be the platform to put yourself out there on. Now that I'm a bit older or more comfortable in what I'm putting out in the world, I'm thinking less about social media and I'm trying to think about more thoughtful ways to communicate my ideas.



a/wake in the water: Meditations on Disaster. Post-Katrina Sunset. Artist: Tameka Norris.

You are working with Anne Ellegood on organizing *Made in L.A.*, what's that process of collaborating with another curator like?

Yes, I am working with Anne! She has been at the Hammer for eight years and she is an incredible curator. I have been so impressed with the way she does things with grace but also with intellectual rigor. I didn't take curatorial studies, and didn't get a masters. Her being on the other end of that is really interesting in terms of how we work together. When you see a longer trajectory and how important it is to bring in those older conversations to help you solidify your conversations, it's really important. She did the [Jimmie Durham show](#) that she had been working on for years, and obviously there has been a ton of controversy around it. She wrote a response in ArtNet about some of the issues around his identity, and I think, whether I agree or disagree with what she is saying, what was more important to me is that she did her research, she had footnotes, and she interviewed so many people. As a curator, you have to know how to defend the work you put into the world, and you have to be responsible for it.

I'm sure its a two-way street and she is learning from you, too.

Oh yeah, I'm sure, but I think that's just how I'm feeling about things and understanding how she goes about her work. Marcia Tucker was one of her mentors and she tells me stories about going on studio visits with her, and this idea of etiquette. There's an etiquette to curating. If you're going to be five minutes late for a studio visit, call the artist and let them know. I don't know if that etiquette is still around, but I really want to tap into it because artists are in these vulnerable positions dealing with galleries and museums, even just putting their work out into the world. It's super vulnerable to be an artist.

Do you have a mentor? You seem like a very renegade/do-it-yourself type of person.

I've never had a mentor and I don't know how I feel about that, but I think there are other ways to think about mentorship. My mom is a mentor to me in just dealing with life. Some of my friends, I consider them mentors. There are a lot of artists who I consider mentors more so than other curators. I'm not interested in people who are self-claiming mentors just because they're a bit older. Something that I've run into in the past that has turned me off to that is this sort of ageist conversation around, "Well, I'm older than you so I know this and that," but that's not the energy that I want to take into a relationship. I think it's just about honoring people who think differently from you.

You're from L.A., did you learn anything new about the city through organizing *Made in L.A.*?

I've learned that the way that I have seen gentrification affect artists in real time has been wild. At a number of the studio visits we went to, artists were like, "I'm so glad you came now because I'm getting kicked out this month." A lot of artists who are based Downtown, you know, new developers come into their buildings, hike up the prices to then kick them out and turn it into something else. The development in Los Angeles is so insane right now and so ruthless and so unapologetic that my greatest fear is that we turn into a situation like San Francisco where a lot of smaller cultural institutions and a lot of artists were kicked out of that city. And if there's no culture in this city, then what's the point? The biggest thing I've learned is just how people are navigating all of that on a very personal level.



Erin Christovale mentors A-Ian Holt and Indigo June

I feel like you are doing so much all the time. How do you avoid burnout?

I was definitely burnt out this past fall and it was rough. I'm learning the value of sleeping more. I'm learning the value of longevity and projects that take time. For me, something I've also been learning is how so many Black women feel like we can't say "no," or that we have to work extra just to prove our existence in a certain space. I'm trying to resist all of that, but naturally I feel surges in certain moments where I think, "Am I supposed to be here? Do these people understand me? Is my work being valued?"

There have been so many Black women in academia who have burnt out or fallen out of that space. There's also been a few women who have died from stress. This is totally different, but just thinking about Erica Garner right now, literally dying of heartbreak, and how I feel, as a Black woman, that we're in that position a lot and it's really critical to think about when I take on different things. It's like, "Am I going to be okay with this?"

Erin Christovale recommends:

Aron Sanchez's Instagram [waterbod](#), which is a poetic and surreal look at the watery creatures of the oceans and tide pools that mark our California coast.

[This letter](#) to the editor called "To Be a Black Artist" that one of my favorite filmmakers, Bill Gunn wrote this after his seminal film [Ganja and Hess](#) (1973) was trashed by a white film critic.

[Harvest Time](#), a 20-minute fuzzy fever dream by jazz legend Pharaoh Sanders from his 1977 album *Pharaoh*.

[Made in L.A. 2018](#) curated by Anne Ellegood and I.

The [Midnight Cowboy soundtrack](#), one of my favorite films and great for road trips up the 1!

The [Anita Baker](#) farewell tour, for the culture and beyond.

Name

Erin Christovale

Vocation

Curator



