

ARTS & CULTURE



DISCONTENT Richard-Jonathan Nelson's solo 2019 exhibition 'Discontent with Brute Force Uploading.' PHOTO COURTESY OF RAC.

Art of the Heal

José R. Rivera takes leadership role at Richmond Art Center **BY JANIS HASHE**

When it's safe to do so, the venerable Richmond Art Center will reopen under new leadership. José R. Rivera, the new executive director, is well aware he's assuming control as the RAC faces multiple challenges.

The City of Richmond, which partially funds the institution, is grappling with a budget shortfall originally projected at \$27 million dollars for 2020–2021. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, the RAC will need to take measures to ensure the safety of gallery visitors and art students. And the center, like all traditional arts organizations, must reinvent itself to become even more important and welcoming to a diverse community, or risk becoming a relic as older, white patrons—to put it bluntly—die off.

But Rivera welcomes the challenges. With more than 25 years of experience with both for-profit and nonprofit organizations in California, Florida, Puerto Rico and Massachusetts, the Albany resident has managed budgets of up to \$600 million. It was his background with organizations dealing with change that attracted the RAC's search team to him. He is the former director of administration, privacy and compliance at Lincoln Families in West Oakland, as well as the former executive director at the City of San Jose's Work2Future Foundation.

Although Rivera was not an "avid" attendee of RAC exhibitions and events, it was on his radar. When he spent more time in its "beautiful galleries and impressive classrooms," he was

convinced he could make an impact. His work with disadvantaged children and young adults, and mentoring minority students, will bring a new perspective to the center.

"When we reopen, the ceremony can be a healing," Rivera said. "That the RAC board hired a Hispanic, a Puerto Rican, to run the center—that makes a statement."

He's committed to making all outreach bilingual, reaching out to a community that "might see the building and not know what is in it for them."

Which is a lot. The RAC presents 13–16 exhibitions in four galleries each year, and offers more than 100 art classes and workshops in six studios four times a year to 1,200 students each quarter. Its "Art in the Community" program provides after-school art experiences to schools and community centers, engaging nearly 2,200 underserved youth. Since 1997, the center has annually presented "The Art of Living Black," which in 2020 morphed into "The Art of the African Diaspora," featuring 150 artists of African descent, and including shows in 30 other venues in 10 Bay Area cities.

Yet Rivera acknowledges the center

can do more. He envisions scholarship programs helping more low-income people become members.

"Those who can afford full-price memberships ... we may ask them to contribute to a fund to aid those who can't," he said. "People want to help. And we want the community to know that if they can't afford membership, we still want them here."

Like many art institutions worldwide, Rivera and RAC staff are developing a number of online programs to provide both extended outreach and additional revenue to keep the doors open (RAC gallery shows traditionally have no admission fees). The virtual programs that prove popular and successful could continue even after gallery and classroom hours resume. The center is also conducting an online "Richmond Art Center Renewal Fund," targeted to raise \$300,000.

The RAC's circa-1951 building includes an extensive courtyard where exhibits and some classes could possibly be held. Some of its classrooms are spacious enough to accommodate social distancing, if necessary.

"We will be back in business, but reinventing and reimagining the center," said Rivera.

He emphasized that on a very practical level, the RAC's building is undergoing an extreme deep-cleaning.

"People will be safe here when they do return," he said.

Meanwhile, a huge yellow "Black Lives Matter" mural now adorns Nevin Avenue, adjacent to the rear of the RAC. Art and artists, both performing and visual, are speaking out about the need for change globally, nationally and in Richmond. According to its materials, "The Art Center's mission is to be a catalyst in Richmond for learning and living through art."

There's no better time than the present for that to be true.

"Stay tuned for our timetable," Rivera said. "The Richmond Art Center is a jewel of the East Bay."

He plans to do his best to keep the jewel shining—and accessible to everyone.

Visit richmondartcenter.org for additional information about the RAC's plans to reopen.