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## Ginger Shulick Porcella brings edgy energy to San Diego Art Institute

73-year-old arts organization's hip new executive director is pushing for change

By Kinsee Moran



Ginger Shulick Porcella  
 - Photo by Kinsee Moran

Ginger Shulick Porcella is hanging by the water features outside "*la bola*," the iconic sphere-shaped building in front of the [Centro Cultural Tijuana](#) (CECUT). Mist from the fountain spritzes her when the wind blows, but she stays put as she searches through a large crowd of labor protestors gathered around the giant ball.

She's looking for [Jose Hugo Sanchez](#), a well-known Tijuana performance artist with whom she hopes to collaborate in the near future.

"I think I'm the one who sticks out here," laughs Porcella, a self-described "old-souled" 32-year-old with several visible tattoos, including one on her chest that reads "Permanence" in large script.

Porcella was named the new executive director of the [San Diego Art Institute](#) (SDAI) at the start of the year, taking the place of Timothy Field, who headed the organization for 16 years [before departing the post suddenly last year under a cloud of secrecy](#). Porcella officially started in March, leaving behind her life in New York City, where she worked as an administrator for several arts nonprofits and collectives and ran her own art consultancy.

One of Porcella's first tasks has been an in-depth survey of the area's art scene. Rather than focusing only on San Diego, though, she's taken a more regional approach and began networking with interesting artists and arts organizations from Los Angeles to northern Baja California.

"We're in the process of redefining SDAI's mission and expanding our membership to be more inclusive," she explains. "I mean, really, who do we want to be?"

SDAI is a 73-year-old nonprofit most known for its recurring juried shows primarily exhibiting the work of member artists, who pay annual fees. Located in the basement of the Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park, the institution is largely viewed as a place where folks can find reasonably priced, fairly traditional paintings and sculptures made by mostly older San Diego artists. While the organization has helped member artists like Dan Adams, Dani Dodge, Ellen Dieter and Patric Stillman make names for themselves, it's been criticized by some as a pay-to-play vanity gallery. SDAI also runs the San Diego Art Department in North Park, which offers classes, studios and a gallery space for local artists.

For Porcella, who's known for curating shows that involve video, performance art and other more experimental and contemporary work than what typically hangs on SDAI's walls, the transition to the more traditional organization has been a big one. While she promises that local visual art will remain the core of what SDAI does—approximately 75 percent of the programming—she has big plans. Longer-term projects include setting up a residency program open to international artists; transforming a board room into a project space geared toward new-media, site-specific

installations and experimentations; adding a few curated and themed juried shows to the exhibition schedule; and expanding the membership to involve more regional artists working in diverse mediums, including performance art, sound and video. She's also been working to establish partnerships with existing arts organizations. She was in Tijuana just a few weeks ago, in fact, meeting with representatives from the [Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura de Tijuana](#) (IMAC) to discuss collaboration.

"We just haven't done much outreach—we've been so insular," Porcella says. "I think a lot of places in San Diego are very insular, but I feel like that's not the future. The future is collaborating and partnering."

There are a handful of smaller changes Porcella has already set in motion: She's working on a new website, a redesign of the upstairs gift shop and rebranding of the SDAI logo and name. She's also lowering the juried-show entry fee for nonmember artists, upping admission from \$3 to \$5 and getting rid of restrictions on the type of work allowed in shows.

"I think we have all the raw materials for being successful," Porcella says. "We have a great staff, the board's super supportive, the members are supportive and it's a great space and a great location... We have all the organizational infrastructure in place. It's just, like, *OK, what do we do with it?*"

Porcella describes herself as a truck-driver's daughter who grew up on a farm in the middle of nowhere, outside of Chicago. The upbringing set the groundwork for her becoming a lover of art and artists (she's married to artist Don Porcella).

Porcella went to school for piano but hated performing in front of audiences, so she doesn't play anymore; nor does she consider herself an artist or a musician. Instead, she's most comfortable as an arts administrator whose goal is helping artists make a living. She's happy doing administrative tasks like fundraising, grant writing and marketing.



Ginger Shulick Porcella meets with Tijuana performance artist Jose Hugo Sanchez.

Photo by Kinsee Moran

"I always say, I help people who think outside of the box to just shove it all inside the box and make it work somehow," Porcella says, letting loose her distinguishable, high-pitched laugh.

Hugo Sanchez eventually spots Porcella in the crowd, and the two immediately engage in an enthusiastic discussion. They casually exchange their résumés, discuss upcoming exhibitions they're working on and eventually agree that they'll try to work together in the fall. Porcella has a big international exhibition showing at SDAI, which she co-curated, and the day it closes is the same day Hugo Sanchez will open a retrospective at CECUT. They'll find a creative way to collaborate and cross-promote the two shows.

"I like your energy," Hugo Sanchez says before the two part ways. "You have this soul—you want to do things. You're alive."

"Yeah, I'm a doer," Porcella says before heading to her next appointment at [TJINCHINA Project Space](#), a new gallery on Avenida Revolución that's run by artists Mely Barragán and Daniel Ruanova, another two artists she hopes to work with.

"I don't just say things; I make them happen, too," she says. "I'm curious to see how people will respond to change at SDAI. I mean, we're not changing anything too drastically. It's more about incorporating a lot of new stuff and seeing how people respond to that. I think, hopefully, people will like it. If not, we'll deal with it."

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