

January 26, 2024

Dear Director,

Over the past three years, Eik Kahng, chief curator and deputy director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) has been working on an exhibition that would aim to do two things: restage the 1965 Fogg Art Museum exhibition *Three American Painters*, which was created by the important critic and scholar Michael Fried, and complement that restaging with a selection of new works related to those earlier paintings in various ways. The ambition of the show was to facilitate a deeper understanding of a largely neglected moment of high modernism and to open a conversation about the ways in which some of the most celebrated art of the last thirty years — paintings, sculpture, prints, photographs, video — has continued to be invested in the issues raised in that moment though of course in new and surprising ways.

To these ends, an extensive array of loans was arranged — this being one of the most ambitious exhibitions in the museum's history — and a catalogue (to be distributed by Yale University Press) with an introduction and four essays was written and produced. The show was typical of Kahng's work, in the sense that it addressed important moments in the history of modern art that were of major importance but underserved in the critical literature. Previous exhibitions focusing on cubism in the years just before collage and Vincent Van Gogh in his late nineteenth-century context attracted lively public interest and attention in the popular press while also providing forums for serious new scholarship on neglected topics.

A few weeks ago, the SBMA's incoming director, Amada Cruz, decided to cancel the exhibition. The manuscript for the catalog was complete and about to enter the design stage, and the show was set to open in early July. But, despite the success of Kahng's earlier efforts, Cruz decided the show was "too academic." Worse still, having cancelled the exhibition, she then went on to cancel its creator, taking the outrageous step of dismissing Eik Kahng and appointing herself to Kahng's position. This despite the fact that she has no training or qualification to curate while Kahng has been Chief Curator at the museum for thirteen years (and at several major institutions prior to that) and has served in recent years as deputy director, with responsibility for major aspects of the museum's operations.

It's appalling to imagine that a show could be cancelled and the deputy director fired because her exhibition was deemed "too academic" by a newly arrived director scarcely familiar with the exhibition's reasoning and development and ignorant about or just contemptuous of the interests of the community her museum has been serving with great distinction. Even the most casual web search will suggest that Cruz's career has been controversial. And as we see it, the latest turn of events at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, which began within weeks of her arrival, trivializes art, condescends to its audience, and continues Cruz's pattern of controversial leadership, while determinedly overlooking the high pitch of Kahng's career of work there. We, the artists involved in the exhibition, protest the cancellation of the show and the firing of the Chief Curator. We consider these recent developments not only alarming but also insulting — to us, to the Santa Barbara art community and indeed to all artists. What is happening at SBMA now threatens the institution's public and scholarly missions.

Sincerely,

*Willard Boepple*  
*Luc Delahaye*  
*Anthony Hernandez*  
*Joseph Marioni*  
*Larry Poons*  
*John Riddy*  
*Stephen Shore*  
*Jim Welling*  
*Jules Olitski Foundation*