

A NIGHT IN THE GALLERY

by Fatima Mejia

The halls of San José State's art building grow lively as people mingle up and around the floors, stopping by each of the newly opened student galleries. As they move through the space, visitors share food and laughter with the artists. Standing in front of the culmination of their work, the artists receive high praise and curious inquiries on their methods and inspirations. The night continues and their animated discussions fill the air.

Among the chatter, a more quiet conversation: a student confiding with the artist.

On display sits one of Dana Rienks Alfaro's pottery pieces, a cream-colored ceramic bowl on which a pair of faces lock eyes. The figures, reflected on either side of a flower, are constructed of harsh, unrefined linework. Beneath it all, bold black letters spell out, "YOUR PAIN IS MY PAIN."

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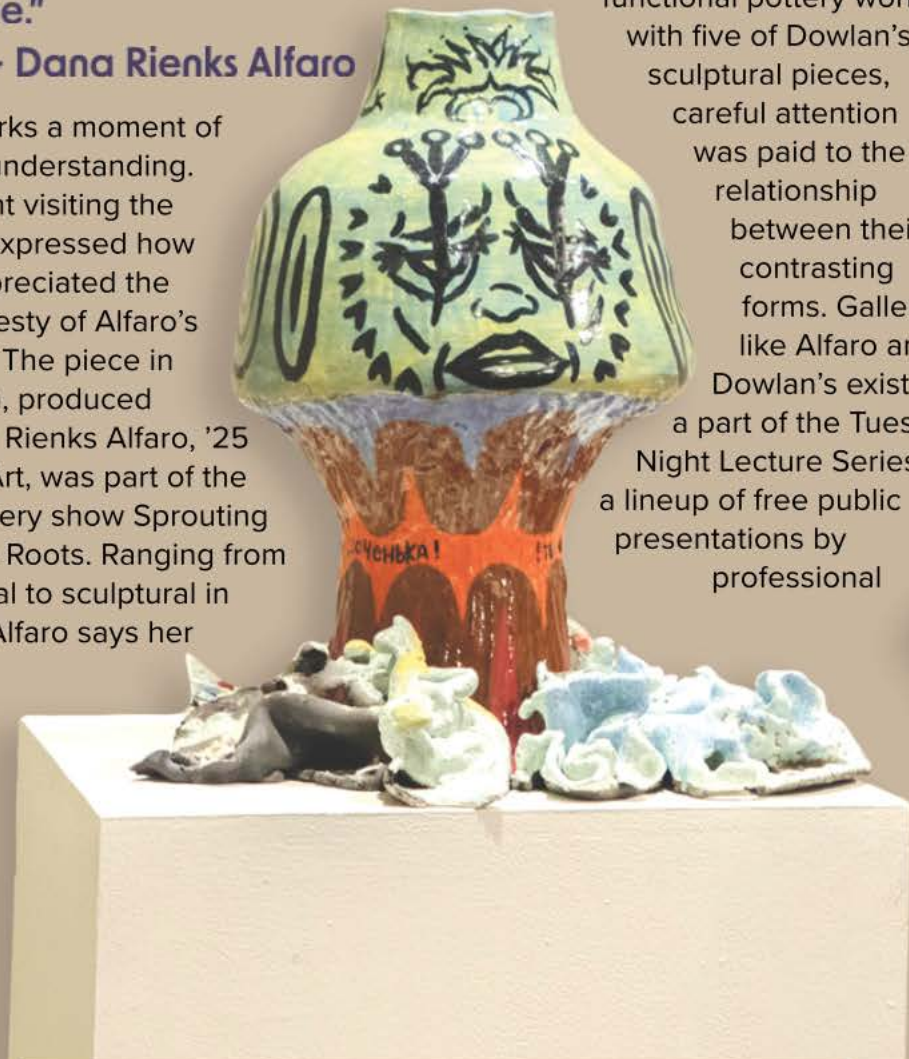
This sparks a moment of shared understanding. A student visiting the gallery expressed how they appreciated the raw honesty of Alfaro's artwork. The piece in question, produced by Dana Rienks Alfaro, '25 Spatial Art, was part of the joint gallery show *Sprouting from the Roots*. Ranging from functional to sculptural in nature, Alfaro says her

art explores growth from pain and the physical manifestation of emotions. She explains watching this resonate with someone during the gallery show made her feel seen not only as an artist, but as a person. "That's why I make art, so people feel seen and so I can feel seen—that way we know we're not alone," Alfaro says. "That was really nourishing."

For *Sprouting from the Roots*, Alfaro collaborated with Celeste Dowlan, '25 Spatial Art. Connecting nine of Alfaro's functional pottery works with five of Dowlan's sculptural pieces, careful attention was paid to the relationship between their contrasting forms. Galleries like Alfaro and Dowlan's exist as a part of the Tuesday Night Lecture Series, a lineup of free public presentations by professional

artists, which are followed by opening receptions in each of the six student art galleries.

Outside campus, the fine art world can be a complex and expensive field to navigate, says Ashley Elieff, an SJSU Gallery Coordinator and Instructional Art Technician. Private gallery space isn't guaranteed, and getting featured hinges on a student's ability to network with gallery owners. In contrast, Elieff points out SJSU has six galleries students can use.



Even if a student doesn't plan on pursuing the fine art world, the student galleries give them the space to learn how to present their art, and engage with an audience through good old trial and error.

They also serve as an exercise of exposure, working toward a finalized product with a fully formed vision. For Alfaro, the desire to make her artwork seen is part of what led her to SJSU in the first place. While previously attending San Francisco State, one of Alfaro's professors felt she would benefit from SJSU's ceramics department and gallery culture, and recommended that she make the switch. "I wanted a space where I could try to do something big where a lot of people are seeing it, not just 10 students in the ceramics department," she explains. Here at SJSU, faculty members encourage students to host multiple shows. This allows them to practice presenting their work intentionally, knowing the audience is not just observing, but openly discussing and interacting with the creator.

After transferring to SJSU, Alfaro found herself faced with a gallery scene far more active than she was used to, which was slightly intimidating to navigate at first. "I was a little nervous to do my own show," she recalls, unsure of what running one on her own would be

like. "I kind of wanted a partner in crime." Enter Dowlan, a fellow student and good friend, who is well-experienced with creating gallery shows. Before this Dowlan had done five shows, both on her own and in groups. After some encouragement from Dowlan, the two came together to create *Sprouting from the Roots*.

During the reception, visitors expressed their admiration for the symbiotic relationship between their works. Dowlan's sculptures lean on intuitive forms, with long tendrils of clay bent over and around themselves. Crunchy bits of texture and mottled glazes join in a myriad of colors, with vibrant accents dappled upon more neutral shades. On one pedestal, Dowlan's sculpture is arranged like a wreath, forming a bed for Alfaro's vase to sprout from. Featuring black swirls and floral linework, the vase is glazed in vibrant orange and earthy greens. Together, the pieces invoke an image of Dowlan's sculpture forming an environment for Alfaro's pottery to exist and grow within.

Looking at their contrasting styles, Dowlan says, "It was fun to play with the orientation of my sculptures in relation

to hers, because they have an interesting connection with each other." Dowlan emphasized wanting the pieces to merge together, so somebody viewing it might think, "Oh, they're like a family and they're intertwined." It was important to Dowlan and Alfaro that their show was more than throwing pottery in a room, and they worked until their pieces found a home with each other.

As Elieff says, displaying works like this can be a vulnerable act for artists, but exposure contributes greatly to their development. Whether it be heartfelt feedback from peers connecting to their work or critique from their professors, gallery walks foster a community committed to supporting one another. When comparing this show to her experience at her previous institution, Alfaro admits she didn't feel seen. Gallery shows were

less common. A smaller audience made it difficult to get feedback. By contrast, she finds the culture at SJSU extremely caring. Alfaro says it's vital for artists to have faculty members who are invested in their progress as well as feedback from an engaged audience, which gives artists a space to be proud of their work.

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Of course, with each gallery comes more experience. For Dowlan, *Sprouting from the Roots* was her sixth show in a journey that helped her with the evolution of her unique style. Dowlan explains while there's many traditional practices with wheel throwing and sculpture, she's determined to break boundaries.



Photo of
Dana Rienks Alfaro (left)
Celeste Dowlan (right)



Deviating from more traditional forms, Celeste uses ceramics as a sculptural medium to capture her subconscious movements and feelings. “I’m stomping on the clay, dancing around in circles, and I’m throwing it in the air, grabbing some of this texture and slapping it on,” Dowlan says. As her physical reactions morph their way into her sculptures, they become highly abstract and expressive.

Dowlan’s distinctive style certainly hasn’t gone unnoticed. As part of the Tuesday Night Lecture Series,

San José State invites professional artists to give lectures for students and the public. On the night of her first show, Dowlan met Juan Carlos, who visited campus as part of the series. Carlos is the owner and curator of Empire Seven Studios, an urban contemporary gallery in San José promoting local and global artists. Dowlan spoke with Carlos when he visited her gallery, though she didn’t think much of it at the time.

To Dowlan’s surprise, Carlos reached out to see if she’d be

interested in selling her artwork at Empire Seven Studios a few weeks later. Dowlan was floored; she remembers thinking, “Oh my gosh, are you kidding me?” That single interaction launched a monumental shift in her career. “It’s an amazing connection I would not have gotten without having a show here,” she says. Juan Carlos regularly visits her shows, and has given Dowlan an entrance into the greater Bay Area art scene.

Dowlan and Alfaro’s experiences, however different they might be,

are exemplary of the community the art department has fostered. Elieff says, “SJSU creates a bridge between students and the outside world, so once they leave they’re not floundering.” She says no matter what stage of their career a student finds themselves in, creating a gallery show allows them to refine their artistic vision, setting them up for a stronger future as independent artists.

In her experience coordinating for SJSU, Elieff notes many students have kept in touch with their

graduating cohort. She says that while the art building might be a small space in the art scene, becoming familiar with peers and watching them develop as artists creates the ideal setting to create and maintain connections. "It's a great tool to present yourself in this world, in any kind of form. It sets up students once they go out into the world," Elieff says. She believes this

kind of community engagement within and outside of the school is something that can change the entire scope of an artist's future.

"It makes me sad to leave next semester, but I'm cherishing every day that I have here," says Alfaro. She finds herself inspired for her future shows, and confident in what she's gained from her experience working alongside Dowlan. "The community here is very caring toward students, and it really grabbed my heart."

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