Major Solo Exhibition by Artist Jessica Vaughn Opens Winter 2021 at the Institute of Contemporary Art

Featuring new and recent work that investigate intersections between labor, race, and workspace environments

January 15, 2021
Philadelphia, PA

The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is pleased to present Jessica Vaughn: Our Primary Focus Is To Be Successful, a major survey of new and recent work, on view February 26 through May 9, 2021. Within this exhibition Vaughn considers the intersections between late twentieth- and twenty-first-century work culture, modular architecture—its promise of malleability and universality—and the marginalized workers who have been rendered invisible within these workspaces. Vaughn (b. 1983, Chicago, IL; lives Brooklyn, NY) transforms and repurposes employee training videos, career exploration tools, government occupational reports, and workplace lighting fixtures into photographs, sculptures, paintings, and video that urge us to reconsider the systems that shape the spaces where work is conducted.

The works on view are grounded in the political and social relations that make up workspaces particularly affirmative action, legislation that was implemented in the 1960s to integrate the government workforce; minimalism, an art movement that prioritized industrial materials; and the development of the office cubicle that would come to revolutionize how and where we work. These three seemingly disparate moments that have been historicized as distinct are in fact intertwined and, for Vaughn, of great critical focus. Presented here are the material legacies of these histories not only as they existed in the past, but as they persist today.
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GENERAL INFORMATION
ICA is located at:
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The museum is open to the public
Wed-Sun, 11AM-6PM.

Entry is by timed ticket registration
only. Please visit us online at
icaphila.org for the latest on safety
protocols in place and new visitor
guidelines, as well as the most up-to-
date information on the university’s
COVID-19 response plan.

ICA is always Free. For all.
Free admission is courtesy of
Amanda and Glenn Fuhrman.

“Vaughn’s practice is centered around an interrogation of
materials that make up our world, but often go unnoticed: the
fabric scraps from public transit, empty postal bins, and office
lighting fixtures, and how these objects are inscribed with the
history of American labor practices” said Meg Onli, Andrea B.
Laporte Associate Curator. “We are on the precipice of new
ways of working if/when we return to the spaces we work. This
survey will be an opportunity to reflect not only on the shift that
we are about to take, but the many changes that have occurred
throughout America’s labor history.”

Among the highlights of the exhibition is Problem Sets, a series of
wall paintings of illustrations from US Government Labor reports
on equity and inclusion, and the video installation Our Primary
Focus Is To Be Successful (2019), a two-channel video of found
workplace training tutorials, footage of office spaces, animated
text and generic hold music. Vaughn has produced her largest
work to date, a site-specific LED-light sculpture, Irrational Rest,
that visualizes occupational lighting patterns over a twenty-four-
hour rotation.

The exhibition takes place at a moment of radical change of how
and where we work. Vaughn’s work encourages us as viewers to
consider the complex histories and, most importantly, the people
who have created the objects and environments that we live with.

Our Primary Focus Is To Be Successful is organized by Meg Onli,
Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator. Related programming
includes a film screening, conversation, and curator-led tour, for
which dates are to be announced. The exhibition is accompanied
by a fully illustrated publication to be released in summer 2021.

Support for this exhibition has been provided by the Inchworm Fund. The
Inchworm Fund is an endowment created to respond to ICA’s spirit of
exploration, supporting artists and curators in their quest to uncover the
unknown through multiyear research, exhibition, publication, and
conversation. In naming the fund, visionary Philadelphia patron Daniel W.
Dietrich, II wished to attract fellow contributors, encouraging ICA to reach
and expand toward new possibilities.

Additional support has been provided by the Graham Foundation for
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The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of
Pennsylvania is a non-collecting institution presenting exhibitions
at the forefront of contemporary practice and culture that
provoke our multiple audiences to think in new ways. ICA is free
for all to engage and connect with the art of our time.

Since our inception in 1963, we have welcomed the challenge of
the current moment to continually evolve as a responsive
institution. We are committed to and advocate for the artists,
research, and dialogues that resonate today.

Jessica Vaughn, Problem Sets, 2020,
acrylic paint on wall. Courtesy of the
artist and and MartosGallery, NYC.