



San José State
UNIVERSITY

**College of Humanities
and the Arts**

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January 30, 2009

To the Selection Committee:

I am writing this letter as a summary of my observations of Professor Cook-Contreras during her two years as a lecturer at San Jose State University. As Chair of the School of Art & Design's Spatial Arts area, and Co-director of the Fine Arts Department, I hired Ms. Cook-Contreras to teach a two-year, full-time temporary appointment. Professor Cook-Contreras' academic assignment included teaching upper and lower division courses, including Foundation classes in Drawing, and 3-Dimensional Concepts. She also designed and taught excellent classes in Sculpture, and an important Cross-Media course that explored Video, Performance, Installation, and Digital Media. In a peer evaluation of Professor Cook-Contreras' Beginning Sculpture class, Professor Tony May commented, "They were all attempting big things and being quite successful... and were rightly pleased with themselves and their projects." The work produced in her classes was often presented in praiseworthy exhibits throughout the school's galleries. She inspired an arresting blend of intellectual and emotional intensity in her students' works. She is a very bright and refreshing instructor.

Shelley is definitely knowledgeable about both art and human culture. Our peer evaluations of her as a lecturer show that she creates an atmosphere of dialogue between class members and herself, focusing on contemporary practice. She encourages her students to speak out, clearly state their observations, and to be open about how the work presented in class affected them. Her approach is challenging, and requires her students to consider new options beyond their preconceived ideas of what art is. Overall, people seemed to love the challenge in the classes I visited, and participated enthusiastically. But best of all, she seemed to have a very trusting, nurturing rapport with her class. She is quick to point out when a student is doing well in class, or when someone makes a good point in discussion, generally keeping a buoyant, positive feel to the group dynamic. Many of her students wrote enthusiastic letters regarding her teaching and critique methods

From the technical standpoint, she extended the range of resources available to her students; organizing access to video production equipment, more shop time for wood and metal work, and use of experimental materials. To counter the declining manual skill levels we observed in new students, Cook-Contreras taught shop-shy students to relax and enjoy aspects of "making things" with non-threatening materials such as wire and cardboard, later introducing the wood, wax, and clay. This situation required Cook-Contreras to adjust her expectations and teaching methods to better fit our schools' particular demographics: many students with not much experience in shop.

The California State University:
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Student evaluations reported that she is very clear and organized in her requirements for class projects, which seemed to help her students to excel technically. They are asked to present their work in various stages, receiving input with each step, i.e. written proposals, drawings, models, and completed works. Her handout materials were packed with excellent technical resources, as well as readings on the working philosophies of well-known artists.

I especially recommend Professor Cook-Contreras for her commitment to bringing an awareness of contemporary art practices to beginning students. To that end her students were required to research and present the work of notable artists and designers working in forms that involve current spatial and time-based concerns. As reported in student evaluations, this integrative study was particularly inspiring to students who held a limited view of traditional materials utilized in sculpture, such as Digital Media and Graphics students who were required to take 3D Design. From the start, she was very adept at working with students from diverse backgrounds. Through assignments requiring self-reflection, Cook-Contreras inspired confidence in those students who were struggling with language and cultural barriers. Because of her interdisciplinary background, she was popular with a wide range of students. Although her professional focus is installation and performance art, she is also an accomplished painter and draftsman, and video and artist. She is able to speak in these different visual languages with her students.

Professor Cook-Contreras was a productive, and accomplished addition to our faculty. Beyond her teaching assignments, she served on several Graduate Committees each term. She was also the Undergraduate Student advisor for Spatial Arts, a member of the School Graduate Committee, the College Educational Equity Committee, the Instructional Improvement Committee, and volunteered as a faculty mentor.

At the close of her contract, faculty reviews, peer evaluations and signed letters from students reported that the overall effect of Professor Cook-Contreras' teaching had been truly invigorating. Her official rating was our highest: commendable. I believe that she is offering a unique and valuable perspective in her area of teaching and contemporary art making, and enthusiastically recommend her work in the future. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me on my mobile at 408-605-0231, or my studio 408-354-2442

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Middlebrook". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "M".

David Middlebrook, MFA,
Co-director of the Fine Arts Department
School of Art and Design, San Jose State University