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REPORT: San Francisco

by dewitt cheng

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Installation views, "Bay Area Now 7"

2014

Photo: Phocasso / John Wilson White

By far the predominant issue in the Bay Area art world these days is its very survival, due to skyrocketing rents. The problem is hardly unique to this region, but with the influx of glamorous high-tech companies, today it is more dramatically visible than ever. Longtime nonprofit venues like Root Division and Intersection have moved or curtailed programming, while numerous long-established commercial galleries have fled downtown or closed their doors. Artists who have put in years of service in the Bay Area art world are considering whether to move on. The situation is unsettled and unsettling. Yet, even so, there is no lack of artistic creativity in San Francisco.

As if to highlight that hopeful fact, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is currently presenting "Bay Area Now 7," its triennial show of up-and-coming talent (from July 18 - October 5), which has become our regional version of the Whitney Biennial. This year, YBCA has opted to venture beyond the artist pool of recent art-school grads, and cast its net a bit further out. YBCA's curators, Betti-Sue Hertz and Ceci Moss summarize the concept behind the "decentralized" BAN7 thus: by "inviting noncommercial, small-to-mid-size regional visual arts organizations to curate site-specific projects with Bay Area artists... using an art fair style format... BAN7 celebrates visual arts organizations as vital players in the local art ecology."

It's a rethinking of the event, previously curated by small groups of curators, that honors San Francisco community groups, who have historically been a strong alternative to the region's commercial art galleries. Observes blogger Ashton Cooper: "The multi-pronged structure of the triennial... shifted the attention from artists to organizations, it celebrated things happening outside of the mainstream gallery and museum world, and it emphasized process and the processes by which art is, or is not, exhibited. The dissonance of voices is what makes this show great." But this diversity also comes with an aesthetic downside, according to art critic Kenneth Baker of the San Francisco Chronicle, who praised previous iterations for their aesthetic excellence and sees the new inclusiveness as a misstep: "Pluralism, driven decades ago by identity politics and since then by the globalization of art commerce, has meant a wholesale loss of the 'criticality' that 'BAN' once stood for." With 15 organizations, 19 curators, and nearly 200 artists, BAN7 is certainly a snapshot of local art activity, whatever individual viewers choose to make of the omnibus exhibit.

The 15 participating arts organizations were selected by a YBCA panel of art professionals: The Lab's Dena Beard, LACMA's Rita Gonzalez, UC Berkeley's Shannon Jackson, and California College of the Arts' Viêt Lê. The selected groups include: [2nd floor projects], Adobe Books Backroom Gallery, the Chinese Culture Foundation, Creativity Explored, the FOR-SITE Foundation, Pied-à-Terre, and Stairwell's (all based in San Francisco); and the Bay Area Art Workers Alliance (BAAWA), Important Projects, n/a, and Publication Studio (each based in Oakland); and di Rosa (Napa), the Estria Foundation (Emeryville), Montalvo Arts Center (Saratoga) and the San Quentin Prison Arts Project (San Quentin). To characterize these groups as diverse would be an understatement. All of them, however, approach the making and presenting of art from a politically liberal viewpoint, while utilizing

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—a bit ironically, of course—Silicon Valley technology. Some serve marginalized audiences outside the mainstream art world, while others provide alternative exhibition space and publication services for emerging artists, predominantly.

The groups directed toward non-traditional, alternative audiences include Creativity Explored, the Chinese Culture Foundation, the Bay Area Art Workers Alliance, Estria, n/a, and the San Quentin Project. Creativity Explored, which serves artists with disabilities, showed work, curated by Vanesa Gingold and Grace Rosario Perkins, that proves that artistic talent is not restricted to art schools. Marilyn Wong's exuberantly packed mixed-media abstract paintings (Two Women, Tina Turner and A Woman Dancing) could hang comfortably next to paintings by, say, Terry Winters or Jean-Michel Basquiat. While Tony Gomez's wall-hung yarn bundles (All Black Pom Poms), obsessively patterned mixed-media drawings (Yellow), and wall-hung installation of drawings with digital projection (Many Colors) satisfyingly meld abstraction and assemblage. Christina Marie Fong's resplendent teenager-bedroom installation (Sexy Diva's in the House)—with its fluffy-animal bedecked bed and swarms of hand-drawn teen-idol posters, CDs, and horror-movie VHS tapes—is reminiscent of similarly excessive, cheerful work by Red Grooms and Claes Oldenburg.

The San Quentin Prison Arts Project, curated by Carol Newborg, is represented prominently by a large 8-by-20-foot mural on five panels, part of a larger 16-panel mural, depicting the urban nightscape, mixing Social Realism with Surrealism (Inside Out), by a six-artist team led by Scott McKinstry. Their other projects include Peter Merts' slideshow of beautifully lighted artist-client portraits, a wall of framed drawings and paintings by 30-odd artists, including Felix Lucero's Blind Curve and Brendan Murdoch's 8th Amendment Cuffed, Bruce Fowler's Magic-Realism mixed-media painting (Theater of the Absurd), models of an ideal city by Peter Bergne, and a prison cell made from a shoebox by Gary Harrell. BAAWA art workers' collective show, "Invisible Labor," features witty, absurd concatenations of art-handler materials which appear to be partially assembled (or disassembled)—e.g., balls of crumpled blue tape and photomural vinyl, and painted cardboard simulations of ladders, tape measures, utility knives and paint-roller trays. Their works remind us that many artists still work manually, and behind the scenes of art venues, facts that can often be overlooked in our fashion-conscious, celebrity-curator age. The excesses of contemporary art come in for some ribbing in the list of materials comprising one piece, which include "vinyl rabbit... smoke, fancy dinner, institutionalized conceit, and indifference." The deadpan-humor Grinder Dust and Moving Blanket would look right at home as serious artworks in many spaces.

Adobe Books Backroom Gallery, Stairwell's, Publication Studio, [2nd floor projects], di Rosa, FOR-SITE, Important Projects, and Pied-à-Terre provide alternative exhibition space and publication services for artists. Curated by Stairwell's Sarah Hotchkiss and Carey Lin, Amy M. Ho's site-specific photomurals (including View and Spiral), displayed around YBCA's stairwell, depict details of architectural models; enlarged, they fit perfectly into the existing space, both commenting on and enhancing it. The mysterious, nocturnal color photos by Daniel Case, of gay trysting spots in secluded Bay Area locations (Nest, Circle, Soft Bed), and the raft-like inner-tube conceptual sculptures of Nicolaus Chaffin (Sick Well/Planchette, Rides) on view in the [second floor projects] exhibition, curated by Margaret Tedesco, work as compelling art objects, even if viewers are unaware of the "erasure of queer lineage" subtext. Adobe Books' exhibition, curated by Calcagno Cullen and Christopher Rolls, featured multimedia work that was difficult to hear because of sound bleed from adjoining galleries; however, Lori Gordon's figurative Aura Portraits watercolors and the painted abstractions of Kristin Farr's and Jeff Meadows' installation, All We Can Do Is Think of You, all beautifully executed, made for rewarding viewing—as did the wall of Important Projects exhibition posters, actual artworks displayed on the street during receptions, but now gathered into an impressive wall collage.

Finally, the monumental "Dead Reckoning" ceramic sculptures of Nathan Lynch for FOR-SITE, curated by Jackie von Treskow, weld aesthetic pleasure to environmental content; based on the ocean buoys that bedeck San Francisco Bay, Gold Reckoning, Cream Lanby, and Sterling Surface remind us of the effects of global warming, and the predicted submersion of all this prime real estate in three centuries or so: bringing it all back home.

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