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Bay Area Now 6

GROUP SHOW

JUL 09 - SEP 25

YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

by *Leigh Markopoulos*

Accepting that the regional survey is a flawed form and that any attempt at taking an artistic pulse or defining the Zeitgeist is fraught with the pitfalls of personal (curatorial) prejudice or preference and institutional constraints, *Bay Area Now 6 (BAN6)* still manages to hit a few nails on the head. The curators present a diverse, gender-balanced overview of local art practitioners that spans the spectrum from emerging (Ben Venom) to established (Tony Labat). The exhibition offers a variety of works across media. It strives to identify trends and themes. And it looks okay, too, for the most part. This is partly due to a streamlined number of artists—eighteen in total—that is very welcome after the cacophony of *BAN5*, which for many, including myself, was a low moment, possibly the lowest, in fact, in the recent history of *Bay Area Now* surveys. It's also due to a well-paced installation in the lower level galleries that unfortunately somewhat runs out of steam upstairs. There, works by Tammy Rae Carland, Mauricio Ancalmo, and Amy Balkin remain marooned in their own concerns, falling victim to an awkward constellation of walls and corridors, which ends on a seeming afterthought—the boxed-in light installation by Chris Fraser.

Nonetheless, overall the exhibition struck me, at least visually, as an earnest enough attempt to weave the threads and strands of individual practices into a tapestry both celebrating and “inspired by the local social and geographic environment,” according to the exhibition poster. Although with six stated “areas of influence” mentioned—food, futurism, environment, community activism, radical identities, and technology—the pattern, to continue the metaphor, was often a little too busy for my taste. There were a number of artworks that I found interesting, such as Tammy Rae Carland's staged photographs of stand-up comediennes in comic repose; Ben Venom's outsize Medusa-head quilt fashioned from heavy metal paraphernalia; and Chris Sollars' refreshingly bizarre and hirsute multimedia installation, to name a few. There were also artworks that I thought less successful. This seems like a fairly balanced, perhaps even predictable response up until this point, and yet I left the exhibition beset by a peculiar, unprecedented feeling of melancholy. Doubtlessly due in part to the omnipresent minor-key strains of Ancalmo's “dualing” pianos, this sense was compounded by the majority of the works themselves, which jointly and individually radiated an overpowering historical nostalgia.

For it would appear from this exhibition that the mores, aesthetics, and socio-politics of nineteenth-century America are now up for grabs in the pursuit of a kind of alter-reality, or alter-modernity, to borrow from French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. In his introduction to the *2009 Tate Triennial* catalogue, Bourriaud claims that artists today seem to have “turn[ed] cultural nomad[s].” And further, that their activities constitute a kind of “Baudelairean *flânerie* through

geographical, historical and socio-cultural realities." Ranu Mukherjee's video *color of history – sweating rocks* (2011) and her ongoing *Nomadic Archive* project (2006-) can be seen as the obvious poster child for this trend. The video work features adept animation, a techno-futuristic soundtrack, and inventive forms (Bedouins merging into rocks that seep oil, etc.) with the intent of highlighting the plight of the peoples of the Sahara, who have been displaced by oil-mining, as well as displaced refugees more generally. Like Bourriaud's nomadic artists, Mukherjee creates a new vocabulary out of a mélange of "realities." And in his opinion, the sum of these parts is an attempt to get the forward-looking impulse of modernity back on track.



Tammy Rae Carland, *I'm Dying Up Here (Upside Down)*, 2010; color photograph; 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.



Richard T. Walker, *The Speed and Eagerness of Meaning*, 2011; three-channel HD installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery, Los Angeles

By contrast, most of the other *BAN6* artists, although grazing cross-historically and culturally, seem to espouse a regurgitated, reconstituted past. The impetus of their work points backward. The evidence is in the anachronistic elements at play in Allison Smith's collages of Colonial-era oddities and ornaments and her teetering pyre of wooden objects both functional and decorative; in Chris Sollars' dandy/woodsman with his verdantly bushy beard; in Sean McFarland's neo-gothic, darkly sublime, under-exposed photographs of grottoes and forests; and in Richard T. Walker's Romantic desert minstrel. The latter two in particular evoke the Victorian era's love of the medieval, constituting another layer of historical reference. While our time does indeed seem to be "out of joint," to quote Weston Teruya quoting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the title of his installation *Time is out of joint: (or haunting the future city)* (2011), not one of the artists here seems compelled, like Hamlet, "to set it right."¹

The vertiginous sense of déjà vu and Baroque (over)complexity includes titles—for example, *Dualing Pianos: Agapé, Agape in D Minor* (2011) (note pun on "Dualing" for extra mileage), Ancalmo's reference to twentieth-century author William Gaddis's novella, which itself owes much to the writings of Plato on the subject of brotherly love in *The Republic*. It also extends to the tweaking of art historical tropes and twentieth-century artists. Holland Cotter, in his review of the 2010 Whitney Biennial for the *New York Times*, identifies "the art of the tweak" as "minute variations on conventional forms and historical styles."² Is Brion Nuda Rosch's installation an attempt to out-Brancusi the master in pursuit of new sculptural forms or perhaps the presentation of the perfect studio environment? Or do his historicized and generic totems remain in the realm of purely emulative mishmash—part Brancusi, part any other type of geometric three-dimensional abstractions? Robert Minervini's large-format paintings contain the elements of Dutch Baroque, collage, montage, Surrealism, and Pop Art familiar from Matthias Weischer's paintings, translated through a West Coast palette and array of references. But by giving us Buckminster Fuller instead of Walther Gropius, is he on to something or merely reprising the Leipzig School art star's temporal and architectural pastiches in a different key? In the recent British mockumentary *The Trip* (2010), Rob Brydon responds to fellow comedian Steve Coogan's complaint that one of his ideas has been "done before" by claiming, "It's 2010. Everything's been done before. All you can do is do something that someone's done before but do it better or different." To a certain level, then, repetition is unavoidable. But familiarity can breed contempt. Ay, there's the rub (*Hamlet*, again).³

Despite all the history, the weakest point of the exhibition for me is its attempted validation by reference to art historical precedents from the '60s and '70s, and it would seem to have been wiser to remain evasive about any perceived relationships to specific conceptual lineages. For example, Tammy Rae Carland's photographs are described in the attendant exhibition poster as "fueled by the energy of 1960s-era feminism." Appearing decidedly un-energetic (the series is titled *I'm Dying Up Here* [2010]), they also seem to be related more to a second wave of feminism and performance, which, while doubtlessly informed by its '60s forebears, has evolved in irony, subtlety, and relevance to our contemporary social situation. Nuda Rosch's and Sollars' works are done a similar disservice by being located within a trajectory of Bay Area conceptualism on the basis of "embracing the potential of discarded objects."⁴ This claim could as easily mark them as "eco-artists" as it overlooks the distinguishing feature of Bay Area Conceptualism, as represented by artists such as Tom Marioni and Howard Fried or Tony Labat—its experimental approach to new forms, media, and platforms for artists.

Our times must be very bleak indeed if all that artists can draw from them are the tools with which to entrench themselves in the past. Thankfully, there are moments of light relief to be had at key junctures in the exhibition. Labat's green neon marijuana leaf greets visitors upon entering the building, and Carland's photographs preface both upstairs and downstairs segments. Irony. Subtlety. Economy. I think it's probably the dearth of these qualities that made for

what on balance was a melancholy viewing experience.

BAY AREA NOW 6 IS ON VIEW AT **YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS**, IN SAN FRANCISCO, THROUGH SEPTEMBER 25, 2011.

NOTES:

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v.188-9).
2. Holland Cotter, "At a Biennial on a Budget, Tweaking and Provoking," *New York Times*, February 25, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26biennial.html?pagewanted=all>.
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, "To sleep, perchance to dream- ay, there's the rub." (III.i.68).
4. <http://www.ybca.org/ban6-visual-exhibition>