



THE BAY CITIZEN

Side by Side, a Bold Opening for Frey Norris

By JEANNE CARSTENSEN
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Raman Frey and Wendi Norris, co-owners of the [Frey Norris gallery](#) — which just moved into a spectacular South of Market storefront space —are not fans of predictability.

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Kelly Barrie

Among the works at the Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern gallery is "Fragmented," acrylic on canvas, by Zhong Biao.

Peek into one window of the gallery and you'll see a large, sleek teardrop-shaped sculpture by the contemporary Egyptian artist [Sherin Guirguis](#).

Look around the corner, however, and a 20th century Surrealist painting — [Remedios Varo's](#) magical nightscape, "Portrait of Dr. Ignacio Chavez," from 1957 — comes into view.

Hung in adjoining areas, the two side-by-side shows of contemporary and modern works are a bold announcement of Frey Norris's much-anticipated arrival in the Yerba Buena Arts District.

Their philosophy is one of openness. "You have to stay receptive, curious and permeable," Mr. Frey said, "and always look."

Mr. Frey and Ms. Norris, who have redubbed their gallery Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, are expanding the program they began in their smaller Union Square location in 2003. In addition to adding nine artists to their roster, they have created the [San Francisco Artist Award](#), a biannual juried award that will honor an under-recognized local artist with a show and a catalog.

Since its inception, Frey Norris has had a bit of a split identity. Mostly known around the Bay Area for their diverse and international lineup of emerging artists, Mr. Frey and Ms. Norris have also built a collection of works by [Leonora Carrington](#), Ms. Varo, [Dorothea Tanning](#) and

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other mostly female Surrealist artists Ms. Norris describe as “marginalized and underexposed.”

They have made waves with their modernist work. In 2008, Ms. Carrington showed her work at Frey Norris in her first United States exhibition in 20 years. And the gallery is lending works to museums for Surrealist exhibitions in the United States, Canada and England. Nevertheless, “the modern collection had become a stepchild,” Mr. Frey said.

“Now we want to put them on an even footing,” he said.

The new gallery on Jessie Street was designed by Gensler Architects to do just that. At 5,100 square feet, about double the previous space, the open floor plan includes a permanent area for the 20th-century Surrealist works. And as the new name suggests, exhibitions will always run concurrently — modern and contemporary.

The two inaugural exhibitions, “Pangea: Art at the Forefront of Cultural Convergence” (through March 26) and “Exultation: Sex, Death and Madness in Eight Surrealist Masterworks” (through April 30), are emblematic of the gallery’s curatorial touch, as they seek to inspire loose, continuing connections between their artists.

Within eyeshot, for instance, are two striking works from different eras: a plaster corset by [Frida Kahlo](#), the first time this particular one has been shown in a private gallery, and an intense collection of graphite drawings of human skulls and limbs, inspired by the book of Genesis, by the contemporary Israeli artist Dana Harel.

Displaying these works together is hardly a radical departure in itself. It’s standard practice in museums and many galleries — including [John Berggruen Gallery](#) and [Modernism](#) in San Francisco, to name just a few — show historical artists and run a strong contemporary program.

But Frey Norris’s dual exhibition strategy stands out. “Most galleries that show contemporary are strictly contemporary,” said Patricia Maloney, editor in chief of [Art Practical](#), a Bay Area online art publication.

Mr. Frey and Ms. Norris also distinguish themselves locally with their commitment to the global contemporary art scene. They travel incessantly, exhibiting at Art Dubai and the Hong Kong Art Fair, and doing studio visits around the world, with their most recent tour to Tokyo, Beijing and Sydney.

Frey Norris’s intergenerational approach stands to benefit both populations that they represent. They make museum-quality Surrealist gems visible to new audiences while buffing contemporary artists’ work through association with older masters.

“So much art today is made as if those making it were unaware that such art was ever made before, as if they had just invented the paintbrush,” said Jonathon Keats, an author, art critic and conceptual artist based in San Francisco and Italy.

For Whitney Chadwick, an art historian and author of the seminal book “Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement,” the work of Ms. Carrington, Ms. Varo and the other female artists loosely referred to now as Surrealists, is as relevant as ever. “They were pioneering in taking themselves as subjects, and fusing personal experience, dream and myth into strong narratives,” she said.

Ms. Carrington, 94, has long been reluctant to speak about her artistic process, much less speculate about how her work might connect with younger artists. “People either accept or are inspired by other artists or not,” she said in a statement conveyed by Gabriel Weisz-Carrington, her son, from Mexico.

Yet there are resonances. “The Surrealists were very cosmopolitan and lived in the diaspora,” Mr. Frey said.

Born in Egypt and living in Los Angeles, Ms. Guirguis, whose sculpture is in the



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inaugural exhibition, said she did not know a lot about the artists on the show's Surrealist side. "But the more art I see," she said, "the happier I am."

jcarstensen@baycitizen.org

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