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ARTFORUM



Mildred Howard, *Untitled*, 1979, Xerox collage, 11 3/4 x 8 1/2".

Mildred Howard

PARRASCH HEIJNEN GALLERY

Bay Area artist Mildred Howard is known for her compelling assemblage sculptures and installations that mine personal memory, community histories, and diasporic movement. This small survey was a thorough and efficient overview of more than four decades of art, presenting some of Howard's most recognizable works—including her wood-framed photo-emulsion pieces and a signature glass-bottle house, which she made this year—alongside a surprisingly fresh-looking selection of early works. Her influences are many: Among others, we see Jay DeFeo in the thick impasto surfaces of her paintings and the found-object deadpan of David Hammons in her sculptures. Yet Howard's art is unique, with elements of distinctly Californian aesthetics (assemblage, Bay Area expressionism, West Coast Conceptual art, San Francisco Funk) employed in lyrical forms and suffused with political meanings.

Three untitled Xerox photocollages dating from 1978 to 1980 were the unassuming standouts of this show. Among the earliest works on view, they demonstrated a young artist engaging with technology while developing her mature artistic style. Two of the pieces—one with deep-magenta tones, the other a rich emerald—were poetic compositions of flowers, petals, and leaves, flattened by the photocopier. The third, from 1979, was a photocollaged self-portrait. In it, half of Howard's face is painted with black stripes while the other half is made up in gold with a thickly kohl-lined eye. She is flanked by images of Native American beadwork and a cropped picture of corn. It's a gorgeous self-representation: at once theatrical, cross-cultural, and vaguely ceremonial. With a romanticism firmly against nostalgia (the collages lack the hackneyed, weathered look of so much 1970s photography), these works might very well have been made by a young artist today. Other pieces seemed more a product of their time, though no less meaningful now.

At the front of the gallery space was Howard's major installation *Ten Little Children Standing in a Line (One Got Shot, and Then There Were Nine)*, 1991. The work, which was created for the Adaline Kent Award exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute, comprised a plinth with cast-copper gloves arranged in a manner that called to mind the phrase "Hands up, don't shoot," the Black Lives Matter rallying cry that followed the fatal 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, by a police officer. The wall behind these casts

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was covered with a tidy, pointillist-like grid created by brass bullet casings lodged into the drywall; on an adjacent wall hung a blown-up newspaper article reporting a 1976 massacre in Soweto, South Africa, during which hundreds of students were killed by law enforcement for protesting the mandatory use of the Afrikaans language (the caption from the AP newswire reproduction falsely reports that only six students were killed). The installation is a poignant reflection on apartheid and the loss of life through senseless violence. And the piece has a feminist dimension too; in writing about its creation, Howard mentions that she has young children and empathizes with the mothers of these murdered South African boys and girls. The work is chillingly current in the context of America in 2020, with the loss of Black lives at the hands of the white supremacist cops and the misinformation that surrounds these incidents. Howard's installation continues to be powerfully haunting, painfully relevant.

— *Catherine Taft*