

Berkeleyside

Striking artwork by long-time Berkeley resident, artist Mildred Howard installed at OMCA

We talk to the celebrated artist about the origins of her mixed-media work, her new projects and her thoughts about Berkeley.

By [Emily S. Mendel](#) March 01, 2019, 7:00 a.m.

Print

A powerful multimedia piece entitled *TAP: Investigation of Memory*, newly installed at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), is the creation of lauded artist and long-time Berkeley resident Mildred Howard.

Howard's evocative mixed-media piece is infused with East Bay African-American culture and history. On the far side of the rectangular space in which the composition is located is a timeworn shoe-shine stand from Oakland's California Hotel. The now-defunct hotel was once a cultural center for the black community and one of the few local grand hotels that welcomed African Americans in the days of segregation.

"It was in the Green Book," Howard said referencing the guide, first published in the 1930s, to services and places relatively friendly to African-American motorists.

Combining concepts of congregation, forward movement, dance, identity and history, this battered shoe-shine stand serves as an altar-like presence facing a center column of painted white shoes, surrounded by many metal shoe taps that are arranged in a pattern covering the raised white floor. It's striking.

A Berkeley resident from childhood, Howard began her adult creative life as a ballet dancer, before moving to the visual arts. She has created numerous

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public installation artworks, including *Three Shades of Blue* on the Fillmore Street Bridge, a collaboration with poet Quincy Troupe celebrating the jazz culture of the Fillmore District in San Francisco. The international terminal at SFO is the home to her *Salty Peanuts*, an homage to Charlie Parker. This award-winning artist creates in many media including sculptural assemblage, collage and large-scale installations.



A timeworn shoe-shine stand from Oakland's now defunct California Hotel is part of *TAP: Investigation of Memory* by Mildred Howard. Photo: Courtesy Oakland Museum of California

In the 1960s, Howard's mother, Mable (Mama) Howard, spearheaded a lawsuit that stopped BART from installing above-ground tracks in South Berkeley, which would have divided that community. Ironically, in 2017, her landlord doubled the rent on Howard's South Berkeley live/work studio, and she was forced to move to Oakland. In 2018, Mildred Howard and her mother were the subjects of a documentary, *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, which

examined the conditions surrounding an African-American family facing gentrification and a housing crisis that threatens South Berkeley's diversity.

Howard considers gentrification to be a national issue since it is pricing black families out of their traditional neighborhoods. "Look at Harlem," she said.

TAP: Investigation of Memory was inspired by a dream of Howard's in which she envisioned an entirely white room a viewer could enter, with a shoe-shine stand and thousands of metal shoe taps. The taps embody tapping into one's memory, and the white painted shoes evoke the dreamlike ambiance of the installation, according to Howard.

After her dream, Howard saw the former shoe-shine stand from the California Hotel on the porch of local artist John Abdul Jaami and bought it. Her piece was finished in 1989 and was exhibited at several sites before she donated it to the OMCA. This is the first time it has been installed there.

A busy artist, Howard has large outdoor projects in the works from San Francisco's Stevenson Street to New York City's Battery Park. She is currently the Westheimer Distinguished Visiting Artist Chair at the Fred Jones, Jr. Art Museum of the University of Oklahoma. From May 17- July 21, Howard's art will be featured at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive's exhibition, *About Things Loved: Blackness and Belonging*.

Howard said that since she moved to Oakland, she has been missing the Berkeley community and is looking for affordable studio space back in her hometown.

TAP: Investigation of Memory is on view at the Oakland Museum of California until Sept. 1. For information, visit [OMCA online](#):