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Time Traveling with Mildred Howard

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by Renny Pritikin



Installation view: Mildred Howard, *The Time and Space of Now*, 2021, commissioned by the New Mexico Museum of Art, 2021.

As we age, accumulated experience shows how we might have acted differently had we realized our motivations and feelings and the gravity of contemporary historical events. Such thinking, dreaming and remembering (which scientists consider different words for the same process) are the subjects of an ambitious, multi-faceted exhibition, *The Time and Space of Now*, by Mildred Howard, one of the Bay Area's most beloved and respected artists.



Millennials & XYZ #IV, 2014, monoprint and digital print on collaged found papers, 20 1/2 x 15 inches. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

The project — organized in part by the New Mexico Museum of Art with prints from the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation — unfolds across three rooms, one containing 30 framed collages (monoprints overlaid with digital scans), a second consisting of three sculptural installations, and a third displaying a video. The gallery walls, painted a striking indigo blue, tie the pieces together, lending the exhibition an ethereal air that models the artist's mind as she ponders the meaning of her 1950s Texas childhood.

While best known as a sculptor, she reveals notable facility with printmaking. Like Bruce and Jean Conner, master collagists whose

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works exhibit seamless logic, Howard incorporates vintage prints from past centuries into her efforts. Pages from a mid-20th century African-American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Tribune*, for example, serve as backgrounds for recent pictures of Black American life. In one instance, three young Black men in hip-hop gear appear atop a vintage adventure cartoon panel about a zoot-suited private eye named *The Bronze Bomber*. In another, an image of a youth overlays a 1940s ad for a performance by blues singer Joe Turner. Howard's recovery of this history – and her linkage of it to current cultural icons — is powerful, but she's really chasing bigger quarry: time and consciousness, the jump from the 1940s to the 2020s being a mere trifle as we flip back and forth, erasing the significance, if not the reality, of that chasm.

Cumulatively, this suite of prints, which includes snatches of the artist's life and Bay Area cultural history, functions as a time capsule. Beyoncé is shown reviewing Civil War soldiers; Howard's late colleague, Hung Liu, seen wearing a colored-pencil-drawn 19th-century gown, appears superimposed on a Bingo card; and a trans figure appears in 18th-century French clothing. These works derive from a Casanova text.



I've Been a Witness to this Game III, 2016, monoprint and digital print on found paper with collage, 20 5/8 x 15 1/8 inches. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

Another group of prints includes the silhouette of a young Black girl, inside of which Howard places found antique prints, usually of warfare or other forms of social violence: the famous Goya image of Napoleon's troops mowing down Spanish civilians; a fleet of sailing warships burning; and Civil War troops leaning on their rifles, all of which juxtapose innocence and historical conflict. The artist repeats the theme in *Island People on Blue Mountain XIX* (2012), a composition featuring the face of a beautiful Black boy placed over a map of North America. A jack of spades tucked into the top corner reduces a guiltless child to a reductive racial slur. Despite the tough subject matter, the

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prints, many of which carry a craquelure usually associated with ceramics, are consummately elegant.

The other side of the gallery shows a large wall-mounted clock set to 6:19: Juneteenth, the date of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The artist's Texas childhood, where Juneteenth had living, ongoing meaning, is invoked throughout the installation. Wall text, for example, carries Zora Neale Hurston's famous declaration: "I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it...No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

In the adjoining space, a blackened, taxidermied peacock hangs over a neat pile of oyster shells opposite a gigantic hourglass suspended from the ceiling, its sand forming a conical shape on the floor mirroring that of the shells. It suggests, ominously, that time has almost run out. For change? Justice? The span of an individual life?

When Howard was 14, she shot some super eight film that she left with her mother and recently rediscovered in an old purse. She incorporates that grainy, blurry footage, of young Black people on the beach in mid-20th century Texas, into a new video filled with fresh images of Black feet walking on a beach



The Time and Space of Now, 2021, Film. Score, Chris Brown. Duration 16:21

in Alameda. Leaping back and forth over more than a half-century, it obscures the boundary between memory, thought and dream. The video is accompanied by a soundtrack containing ruminations on relativity by her friends, the painters Dewey Crumpler and Oliver Lee Jackson. Their thoughts echo the insights and aspirations of Afro-Futurism and the musician Sun Ra, imagining a time and place of Black freedom. Space and time are also, according to Einstein, two ways of perceiving the same phenomenon. Howard's exquisitely executed installation illustrates that fact with deeply felt theatrical power.

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Mildred Howard: "*The Time and Space of Now*" @ [Institute of Contemporary Art, San José](#) through February 26, 2023.

About the author: Renny Pritikin was the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco from 2014 to 2018. Before that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the

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Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. The Prelinger Library published his most recent book of poems, *Westerns and Dramas*, in 2020. He is the United States correspondent for Umbigo magazine in Lisbon, Portugal.

Installation photos: Cameron Gay.