

## HYPERALLERGIC

# Mildred Howard's Art of Giving

She has raised generations of Bay Area artists and changed the local landscape with her public artworks, colleagues tell *Hyperallergic*.

Emily Wilson January 26, 2023



Mildred Howard, "Frame Refrain" (2015), bronze (courtesy Anglim/Trimble)

OAKLAND, Calif. — Last October, artist Mildred Howard, known for large-scale sculptures, mixed media, and public art, was honored by San Francisco's 500 Capp Street, as well as the San José Museum of Art. At the end of the month, the Southeast Community Center opened in San

Francisco's Bayview District, with Howard's commissioned metal sculpture "Promissory Notes" outside. Shortly before this, in September, her solo exhibition, *The Time and Space of Now*, featuring multimedia installations, her first film, and 30 works on paper, opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) San José, and will be up through February 26.

Howard, who was born in San Francisco, grew up in Berkeley, and now lives in Oakland, deserves all the adulation coming her way, says artist Lava Thomas.

"She was one of the first people creating public artwork in the Bay Area, and she's literally changed the landscape," Thomas told Hyperallergic. "She was a huge mentor for me when I was designing the Maya Angelou monument — I had never designed a monument before. And her work in installation art really broke ground for a lot of folks who came after her."

Thomas had seen Howard's work when she lived in Los Angeles. After she moved to Berkeley, she heard that Howard was teaching at Stanford and went to the campus to meet her. After Thomas introduced herself, she told Howard how much she admired her work, invited her to lunch, and they've been friends ever since.



Mildred Howard in her Oakland studio (photo Emily Wilson/Hyperallergic)

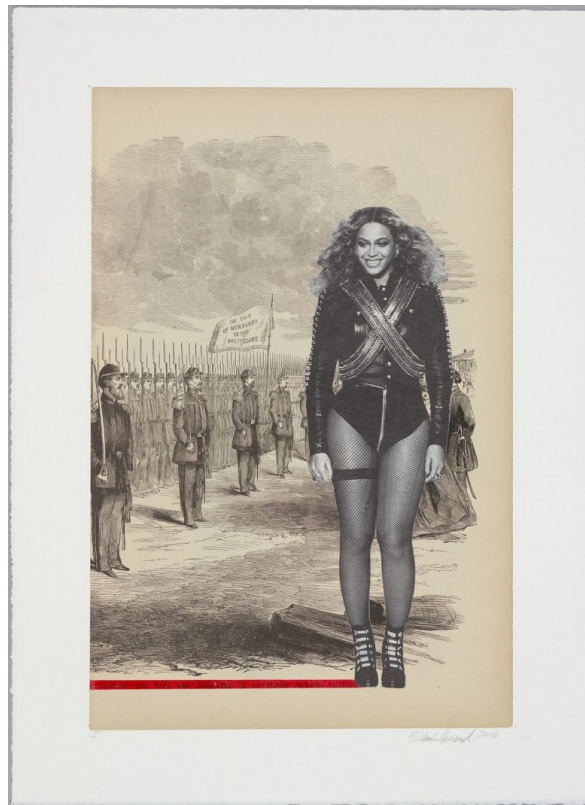
For her show at the ICA, Howard worked with composer Chris Brown to create music for each space and for a film that she made after discovering eight-millimeter film in her mother’s purse that Howard had shot in Texas when she was 14. In the galleries, a large black peahen flies over a pile of oyster shells; a clock is set to 6:19, representing June 19th — Juneteenth — commemorating the end of slavery in the United States; and a large funnel on the ceiling pours sand onto the floor. In another gallery, 30 of Howard’s prints hang on the walls.

Zoë Latzer, the ICA’s associate curator, says she wants the museum to show local artists who make a big impact — like Howard. “The Bay Area has been historically very ignored,” she related. “Our role is really

thinking about who are these incredible Bay Area artists, both well known, like Mildred, as well as emerging and under-recognized.”

Howard earned an MFA from the Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts at John F. Kennedy University and uses a multitude of materials and methods: glass, metals, textiles, collage, photography, and prints. The artist, who began as a dancer, works with musicians like Brown and poets including Janice Mirikitani and Quincy Troupe. She relishes the chance to try out new art forms.

“I get bored easily, and I like exploring other avenues of learning,” she explained in her Oakland studio. “In art school they emphasize you have to work on this one body of work, so that you really begin to understand the material. And that’s true, but at the same time, you can work on multiple areas, and one thing informs the other.”



Mildred Howard, “I’ve Been a Witness to this Game I” (2016), monoprint and digital print on collaged found papers, 20 5/8 inches x 15 1/8 inches (image by Strode Photographic, collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer)

Artist Kija Lucas met Howard when she took a class with her at the San Francisco Art Institute, where the class traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico. The two artists have stayed in touch, and Lucas admires the way Howard shifts back and forth between different styles and mediums in her practice. “She’s an artist to her bones, and she works in whatever way makes sense,” Lucas noted. “Her work is really incredible, and she’s been in the Bay Area making art for so long.”

While Howard is now known for her public art, she says it took her about 15 years to get her first commission, which came in 1984 for “Gospel and The Storefront Church” in Mill Valley. Her next public installation was “Salty Peanuts,” in 2000 at the San Francisco Airport. “It took that many years,” she said. “I kept seeing all these men, and I’m thinking they’re no better than I am.”

Howard persisted because she wanted to expand what she did and expose her work to a broader community. “I’m constantly trying to challenge what I know and what I don’t know,” she mused. “It’s that challenge that interests me.”

Troupe has read his poetry at several of Howard’s openings, and he composed a poem to be etched in the glass panels of her “Three Shades of Blue” (2003), displayed in San Francisco’s Fillmore District. The author of two books about Miles Davis, the poet has known Howard for decades and owns several of her pieces; in some ways she reminds him of the famous trumpeter and composer.

“Mildred is direct, and Miles was direct. I’ve always liked that in people — she is no-nonsense about things,” he laughed. “I think Mildred’s



work is powerful and unique. She has her own signature like Miles. If you hear Miles Davis on a record, you know it's him by the voice. If you see a Mildred Howard piece, you know it's hers by the voice.”

In addition to creating artworks around the Bay Area, Howard has been involved with her local community in many ways. She developed a curriculum integrating art and science for San Francisco's Exploratorium, and at chef Alice Waters's invitation she became executive director of the Edible School Yard at Berkeley's Martin Luther King Middle School.

Artist Leila Weefur grew up in Oakland seeing Howard's artwork. They met when Howard was a visiting artist at Mills College while Weefur was in graduate school there. “She has a lot of perspective and holds a lot of history about this place,” stated Weefur. As an editor at *Art Practical*, Weefur made a video series about Bay Area artists that included Howard. “I want to uplift her story and make her known to the younger generation.” Weefur added, “She has encouraged me, she has been a friend and someone I can call when I'm having difficulty.”

James Leventhal, director of the ICA San José, asserts that Howard has made generations of artists in the Bay Area feel that their work matters and they have something to say. “I think she's just been such an important mentor and teacher for so many people for so many decades,” he expressed. “She has just been a living embodiment in a lot of ways that it's possible [to succeed]. I think she gives that feeling to people.”

Kija Lucas, like Troupe, is impressed by Howard's directness. “She doesn't beat around the bush .... She's very giving, and she tells you what's up. She'll let you know the real deal — she's not going to pretend. She's the opposite of a gatekeeper for generations of students.”

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500 Capp Street's director, Cait Molloy, believes that Howard has been instrumental in using art to engage people, ranging from children to those who are incarcerated. In Molloy's experience, Howard wants to share what she knows.

For Howard, who is in the process of making enough work for three shows in eight months, helping other artists is part of the point.

"It's hard," she said. "The journey is nothing without taking someone along with you."



Mildred Howard, "Abode: Sanctuary for the Familia(r)" (1994), bottles, wood, sand, stones (courtesy Anglim/Trimble)

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Mildred Howard, “The Time and Space of Now” (2021), mixed media installation, commissioned by the New Mexico Museum of Art, 2021 (photo by Cameron



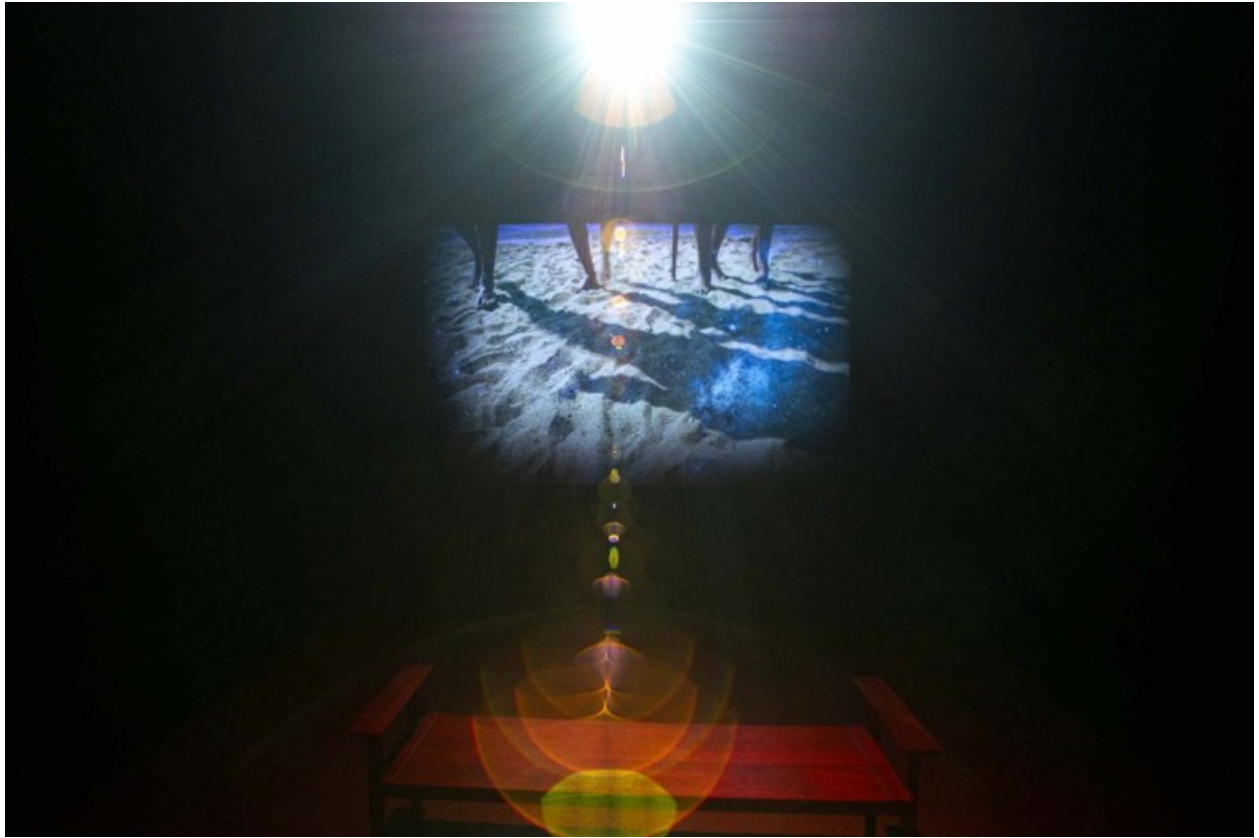
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Mildred Howard, “Assegnazioni con De Seingalt X” (2017), monprint, collage, chine collé and digital print, 20 3/4 inches x 17 inches (image by Aaron Wessling Photography, collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer)

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Mildred Howard, “The Time and Space of Now” (2021), mixed media installation, commissioned by the New Mexico Museum of Art, 2021 (photo by Cameron Gay)