

REVIEW / Cross section of Bay Area artists' work highlights the chasm between creators and crowd

Hank Willis Thomas' "Priceless #1" hangs above the entrance to Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Everyone who walks east on Mission Street's south side can see it. By dint of its position -- and that alone -- it serves as a banner for "Bay Area Now 4," the latest edition of the YBCA's triennial survey of regional contemporary art.

Nothing else in "Bay Area Now 4" has anything like the emotional or critical force of "Priceless #1."

In it, Thomas slams an ugly fact of urban American life up against the cute pitch of a credit card ad ubiquitous in the parallel world of mass media. In white type over a color photograph of an African American family grieving graveside, Thomas runs his version of a too-familiar TV-commercial litany: "3- piece suit: \$250; new socks: \$2; 9 mm Pistol: \$79; gold chain: \$400; Bullet: ¢60 ... Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless."

Expectations of almost any kind will tend to produce disappointment in visitors to "Bay Area Now 4." Like all such core-sampling projects, including the Whitney Museum of American Art's closely watched Biennial Exhibition, "Bay Area Now 4" attempts the impossible, selecting artists to represent a moment in a landscape of creativity.

Visitors who track the local art scene may find that "Bay Area Now 4" contains comparatively few surprises. It includes such lately familiar names as Libby Black, Michelle Lopez, Christian Maychack, Josephine Taylor and Xylor Jane.

Like many of YBCA's shows, "Bay Area Now 4" gives off a faintly utopian air of curatorial wishful thinking.

Projects such as Ted Purves' "Momentary Academy," the "Hamburger Eyes" photo archive and John Hattori's video catalog of "60 One-Minute Portraits" express nostalgia for a social order based on spontaneous reciprocity, far removed from what most of us experience every day.

The most inviting work in this vein may be Margaret Tedesco's narrow installation of benches at right angles to a wall on which she projects movies. At set times, Tedesco will appear in person to narrate the action and dialogue of a movie her audience can neither see nor hear clearly.

For her "Telecommunity Portrait" (2005), Edie Tsong has set up a video conferencing system in the gallery, linked to one in her studio. She invites viewers to make a portrait of her as she appears onscreen, while she portrays each of them and sends her drawings in by fax.

Visitors' portraits of Tsong accumulate on the wall, making for some fascinating viewing and giving rise to the thought that only a collective response can form a truthful portrait of any individual.

The Gestalt Collective, consisting of Scatha G. Allison, Nome Edonna, Ezra Li Eisman, Alex Eremian, Sirron Norris and Ricardo Ritchey, has blanketed YBCA's mezzanine west walls with an epic, mostly improvised mural. A roller-coaster ride for the eye, it also serves as the exhibition's most vivid image of cooperation, beyond ego, formula or analysis.

Several works on view mark an opposite pole of personal obsession. Three photo self-portraits document Liz Cohen's continuing project of self-

transfiguration, "Body Work."

"Welder" shows her in an auto body shop, clad in bikini and high heels and goggles, wielding an acetylene torch. Behind her a burly mechanic -- who just happens to look like Donald Judd and James Turrell

morphed together -- eyes the camera with an expression that mingles bafement with lubricious pride.

Concurrently she has been transforming herself into a bombshell primed to enter the bikini contests that frequently accompany amateur auto shows. Meanwhile her photographic self-portraits in auto body shops satirize the sort of calendar cheesecake that commonly decorates the walls of such establishments.

Unknown to most of her technician collaborators, Cohen's project smartly dovetails with the work of predecessors such as Chris Burden, Orlan, Matthew Barney and Jeff Wall. It also caricatures gender codes and the will to keep high and low culture apart.

With her "Kate Spade Store" (2005), Libby Black has duplicated a Union Square boutique, complete with all its goods. Her simulations of shoes, purses and other signature items make the equation of artworks and luxury goods complete, down to their rule by fashion. The exhaustion of critical resistance implicit in Black's work perfectly captures a mood familiar to anyone who thinks about art's place in the world today.

Optimism glimmers most genuinely in the work in the show that runs on skill: the stitch craft of Anna von Mertens' politically charged quilts, Josephine Taylor's hand-drawn visions of family psychodrama, in Adriane Colburn's touchingly thorough cut-paper map of the San Francisco sewer system.

Not a style but a tension defines the region's contemporary art, the show suggests: the tension between the value of art to those who make it and its value to everyone else. In making that tension public, the exhibition probably heightens it further.

Bay Area Now 4: Triennial regional survey of contemporary art. First floor through Nov. 6; second floor through Sept. 25. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St, San Francisco. (415) 978-2787, www.ybca.org.

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