



ART & EXHIBITS

Mildred Howard talks about race, museums and how the art world needs to continue evolving in 2021

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Mildred Howard is seen with her “Untitled House” project in her studio in Oakland. Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

Mildred Howard is known globally for her award-winning work as a sculptor and assemblage artist who frequently takes everyday objects and imbues them with greater meaning and depth in her revisioning and recontextualizing.

The work often takes the form of structures and shelters, like her 2011 installation “The House That Will Not Pass for Any Color Than Its Own,” a shed-like construction presented last year in

New York's Battery Park. Her visual language has often explored ideas of identity, history and the significance of memory.

Anglim/Trimble gallery recently featured work by Howard in a solo show, "Look Through to the Other-side," and she is currently the lead artist on the new Southeast Community Center project in San Francisco's Bayview district.

Howard, a lifelong South Berkeley resident, spoke to The Chronicle about diversifying representation in museums, society's ongoing racial reckoning and how she thinks the art world needs to evolve to be more truly equitable.

Q: What has your experience as a Black woman been like in the art world?

A: I have this part of me called A-R-T. I love it because I couldn't *not* do it, but it's also difficult to make a living doing it.

I'm a Black woman living in the United States of America and in the world. I'm no more special than those who are living outside my studio, who I see walking up and down the streets all day long, people that looked like me that don't have a job, living on the street.

The whole thing about race is made up; it's a social construct, but it could be used against you. When we look at museums or any of the arts institutions across the globe, only recently were any artists of color being mentioned at all. And if you saw an image of a Black person, it was in a servitude manner.

S.F. artist George McCalman takes on the burden of Black history, one portrait at a time

5 tips on how to be an ally to artists of color



Mildred Howard's "Strings to the Heart" is a work in progress at her Oakland studio. Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

Q: Do you see the art world as a microcosm for society's issues with race?

A: Yes. And money. Money talks. But that also is a part of the bigger picture because look who has money and who doesn't have it.

Being an artist gives me a voice to say what I want to say, and I don't always benefit from speaking out.

Q: Talk to me about going into museums and not seeing other Black people or work by Black artists.

A: Sometimes, I'm the only one. But this whole thing is just bigger. It's the lies that have been perpetuated for years, since this country was built, in almost every aspect of it. If one can go through, up until recently, the educational system and only see a few people that look like me and had melanin in their skin there. ... There it is, right there. I probably had in my early education, maybe two African American teachers, maybe three. And if I didn't take it upon myself to do independent study in graduate school with people of color, I would not have had any.

Q: Did seeing work by Black artists help you envision yourself in the art world?

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A: Yes, especially in abstraction, because within that media, you can see references of Africanism and of the Black experience. At least I can. Look at the work of Mary Lovelace O’Neal, Oliver Jackson, Dewey Crumpler, David Bradford, Raymond Holbert — you didn’t even know about Howardena Pindell until recently. Raymond Saunders, who I met when I was 18 years old. There are all these people who I came to know in school, some a few years my senior, and some are my age that I had around me.

Being introduced to Paul Robeson, hearing Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price. Duke Ellington performed two doors from my house. Josephine Baker. I have that experience, but everyone didn’t have that experience.



Mildred Howard is the lead artist for the proposed Southeast Community Center project in San Francisco’s Bayview district. Photo: Magnolia Editions

Q: How do you think the arts can become more equitable?

A: Once again, money talks, right? That’s the bottom line.

Q: Should there be a push for more state arts funding?

A: In some ways, yes.

You know what I’d like for you to do? Google “**Abbey Lincoln ‘The World Is Falling Down.’**” You know who is similar to that now? The young woman who read the poem at the inauguration, **Amanda Gorman**. ... All people have to do is open their eyes. We have always been here, it’s nothing new. If art is about seeing, then open your eyes.