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Hope, danger, humor coexist in exhibit spotlighting top SF Bay Area artists

by Lou Fancher



Woody De Othello, at work in his Richmond studio, often uses everyday objects to evoke themes and meanings in his works (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts).

Turbulent times and hope for the future are both on view in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' eighth annual "Bay Area Now" exhibit.

The exhibit running through March spotlights 25 artists selected as representative of the style and tenor of the Bay Area arts scene. Artists in all kinds of formats — from paint and ceramics to photography, video, mixed-media installations and more — as well as designers and architects are represented.

A common element of this year's selected artists is the use of debris left behind by institutional disruption and violence — evictions, forced migration, demographically disproportionate incarceration, queerphobia, colonialism, slavery, environmental destruction, and more. Often, the works imply renovation or complete dismantling of existing power structures to create safe places for healing, forging new alliances and building hope for the future.

Marking YBCA's recent mandate to acknowledge environmental and landscape art as well as housing design as important segments of the art scene, and underscoring the increased importance of place and setting in contemporary fine art, co-curators Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor sought to include in Bay Area Now for the first time designers and architects who define our cities, homes and workplaces. Accompanied by Martin Strickland, YBCA associate director of public programs, who organized the exhibit, the curators visited Bay Area expanded their search to design studios and architecture offices.

Strickland said in an email that the experimental, fluid nature of the selected designers and architects posed a challenge to YBCA on how to represent their genres in an exhibition setting. On the flip side, he says, "Both are such flourishing communities in the Bay Area —we wanted them to recognize YBCA as a place where their ideas and work (are) represented."

Kantor said many artists respond in their work to physical, political and social environments, making for an organic connection to design and architecture.

From Sofía Córdova's post-Hurricane Maria video/sculpture installation to Constance Hockaday's works inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chat radio broadcasts to David Bayus' end-of-the-universe dwarf star tended to by a single farmer, the artists make evocative statements about where and how survival is possible.

Rhonda Holberton's installation invites visitors to experience a reiki (hands-on healing) session via virtual reality; Charlie Leese alters perspectives with a bare-bones structure emphasizing the absence of a body within, and Woody De Othello's ceramic sculptures introduce everyday objects as human.

Othello, who lives in West Oakland and creates in a studio in Richmond, often features such things as phones, analog clocks, teapots, waste baskets and handrails in his art. For Bay Area Now, he is represented by a work titled "Rest in power, let it not be in vain," which includes three oversized candle holders, a 30-inch tall urn and tile base and riser-like pedestals upon which they rest.

"The materials themselves carry marks of the artist's hand, evoking the labor that goes into their making," says Kantor. "The installation functions as a memorial both general — speaking to our world at large — and specific, thinking of those in the Bay Area who have recently and unjustly lost their lives."

Othello, 27, says the work, with its themes of time and mortality, is "self-explanatory," and intended to start conversations more than convey a particular message. Some will recognize the religious themes evident in the trinity of candle holders, but anyone familiar with candles placed in public settings to mark a passing of life will find an entry point.

"It's inherent with the times we've been living in," he says, "there are a lot of publicized deaths in the media. It's a common experience of being human so I don't value one life over another. The title indicates the nature of remembrance."

Asked to recall childhood memories and artistic influences, Othello says he always drew —himself as a boxer beating up bullies, for example — before turning to aluminum foil as a primary material.

"I made weird things. My mom always kept the house loaded with aluminum foil to keep my imagination stimulated." In high school, he worked on the yearbook and made custom T-shirts adorned with text and the flag colors and outline of Haiti.

"My dad was always saying, do what you want to do as long as you put your best foot forward. He instilled in me the idea to give my best energy to whatever I was committed to."

After earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics at Florida Atlantic University, Othello completed an Master of Fine Arts at California College of the Arts in Oakland. Along the way, affinity for the cartoon-style realism in neo-expressionist painter/printmaker Philip Guston's work sparked narratives embedded in Othello's self-described, "slumpy energy, woody-fied" artwork.

Humor rides on the surface of his ceramics, but underneath, deeper reflection touches on everything from society's over-reliance on technology, to how a person feels on a Monday morning, to the manner in which we pass through the world.