

KQED Arts

200 Years of Eclectic Bay Area Art at BAMPFA

By Sarah Hotchkiss on January 24, 2018

If BAMPFA's grand coming-out party in their now two-year-old Center Street location addressed their immediate surroundings (new building, who dis?), their latest foray into large-scale group exhibition-making expands that area of self-reflection to encompass the entire Bay Area.

Way Bay, an expansive retrospective of Bay Area art running through June 3, is smaller in square footage than *Architecture of Life*, but packed full, salon-style, with objects from the museum's collection (along with a few pieces from the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Bancroft Library).



Franklin Williams, 'Untitled,' 1968. (Courtesy of BAMPFA)

The result is (way) overwhelming and (way) exhilarating. Instead of identifying artworks with wall labels, the exhibition relies on a 36-page gallery guide, complete with diagrams that indicate pieces by the black vinyl numbers mounted discretely near them. Those groupings aren't chronological or media-specific, but poetic — literally. Lines written by Bay Area poets appear as headings for works related to categories which could be loosely interpreted as “light,” “gesture” and “interior spaces,” to name a few.

Hearing BAMPFA director Larry Rinder announce this system of organization at the press preview, one couldn't help but recall the scene from *High Fidelity* when John Cusack's character in the movie describes his efforts to reorganize his record collection “autobiographically.”

“It sounds...” says one character. “Comforting,” Cusack finishes.

Way Bay is also comforting. The Bay Area art scene has a tendency to feel insular — often proudly so — especially when compared to cities with larger commercial markets, higher-profile gallery scenes and moneyed populations that actually buy art. What we find at BAMPFA is 200 years’ worth of artmaking that doesn’t necessarily ignore those concerns, but also buttresses itself. The exhibition’s groupings, enigmatic as they might be, support the premise that across centuries Bay Area artists have engaged with common ideas and themes, building on the work of their predecessors in endlessly generative cycles.



Juxtapositions within groupings create those moments of exhilaration. In the very first gallery of the show, Alice Anne Parker’s *Riverbody*, a 16mm print (digitally presented) fades between short clips of nude men and women standing squarely before the camera. The sound of lapping water creates a soothing soundtrack. Their identities fade into one another, finding a nice analog a little way up the wall in Carina Baumann’s *Untitled*, an almost-invisible self portrait taken under the light of the moon.

Later in the show, a hulking bronze vessel made by Bay Area ceramics legend Peter Voukos sits opposite newcomer Nick Makanna’s more delicate ceramic armature of *Rune XX*, a few generations between them.

Nick Makanna, ‘Rune XX,’ 2017. (Courtesy of Andres Guerrero Gallery)

While some of the more formal and abstract pieces feel as if they could have been made anywhere, anchors dotted throughout the exhibition squarely locate the show in Bay Area history, many of them photographs: Ruth-Marion Baruch’s shot from a 1968 Free Huey Rally, Imogen Cunningham’s *Coffee Gallery*, Christopher Russell’s rushed and blurry images of men cruising in San Francisco’s Buena Vista Park. Scott Stark’s 1982 film *Degrees of Limitation* captures the artist running up a steep San Francisco hill. It’s part conceptual art piece, part Chaplin-esque comedy, and wholly relatable.

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Bruce Baillie, Still from 'All My Life,' 1966. (Courtesy of BAMPPFA)

The inclusion of moving images alongside static pieces give the exhibition a wonderful liveliness. Unlike one-off screenings, the curators hope, these looping digitized films will provide visitors with the chance to return for repeat viewings — and to see the films in the context of other Bay Area art.

The standouts of these are two films projected on opposite sides of a hanging wall in the exhibition's rear corner. *Tribune-American Dream Picture*, a 7-minute silent film produced by the *Oakland Tribune* in 1945, reenacts a dream submitted by Mrs. L.L. Nicholson (of Oakland) as a photoplay — starring Mrs. Nicholson herself. The dream, which involves a lost baby, a rowboat trip across the Bay, a found fish and a police officer, is like all dreams — illogical, personal, inchoate, like an episode of *Drunk History* based on a made-up incident. It's hilarious.

On the back of that wall is an equally strange journey. *Simulated Marin Tour*, a 1973 film made at UC Berkeley's Environmental Simulation Laboratory, captures the experience of a drive through San Rafael. You think. You soon realize that the other cars aren't moving, the lights aren't changing, and all the scenery, though meticulously rendered, has the appearance of being slightly "off." What we're seeing isn't 1973 Marin, but a model of 1973 Marin — trees included — captured by a camera on a moving crane.

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Laurie Reid, 'Up the stairs into the warm night,' 2016. (Courtesy of BAMPFA)

Way Bay shares qualities with both of these films. The exhibition is a mixture of the familiar and the unknown, all organized in a free-associative, dream-like way. The museum made significant acquisitions — with a focus on work by women and artists of color — to fill gaps leading up to this exhibition. And what comforted and exhilarated me the most in all of *Way Bay's* meanderings were the new names and heretofore unseen artworks to which the Bay Area can now lay claim.