

Expansive, Exciting 'Bay Area Now 8' Lives Up to Its Name at YBCA

Sarah Hotchkiss

September 7, 2018



Sofía Córdova, Still from 'dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta,' 2018. (Courtesy of the artist)

Whether you love it, hate it or have no idea what I'm talking about, Bay Area Now, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' triennial survey of Northern California art, is a big deal.

It's not that inclusion in the show means the artists involved are suddenly wealthy or even guaranteed ongoing success; part of BAN's overlarge status within the Bay Area exhibition calendar is that there simply is no other show like it.

Sure, we've got the SECA Awards at SFMOMA, but those only acknowledge, at most, five people at a time. (And while they used to be biennial, last year's SECA show was the first since one 2012.) And sure, there are annual juried shows at smaller institutions like Southern Exposure and Root Division, but these are neither infrequent enough, nor splashy enough, to warrant the same level of excitement.

It's so rare for the local art scene to see its own members getting large-scale institutional attention—while those artists are still alive—that Bay Area Now has come to occupy a hallowed role in the community.

For its eighth incarnation, BAN returns to YBCA in a slightly simpler form than years past. Gone is the decentralized curatorial premise that marked 2014's BAN7 (which, full disclosure, I participated in). Gone are the performance and video programs. And included for the first time are architects and designers, underlining YBCA's commitment to "the city" as a site of cultural change.

Despite that declared focus, what most emerges in BAN8 are a series of trans-generational dialogues between the artists and their forebears. There are other logical groupings to be made within the works of 19 artists and six architects and designers, aided by canny curatorial arrangements, but the idea of looking back through actual or spiritual ancestors to construct a path forward saturates the exhibition.

Nowhere is this more strongly felt than in Gallery 1, where works by Josh Faught, Nicki Green, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, Marcela Pardo Ariza and Andrew Wilson harmoniously occupy the space.

As in her contribution to Conversation 7 at the SFAC Gallery, Pardo Ariza photographs contemporary members of the LGBTQ community against brightly colored backgrounds, but in this series she captures them interacting with life-sized images pulled from Bay Area queer archives, creating, as she says, "impossible moments" of kinship across the decades. Physical objects borrowed from one time frame and used in another unite many of the works in this gallery, where Wilson will spend the duration of the exhibition sewing caftans (printed with a diagram of a slave vessel) on his grandmother's sewing machine, making visible and physical the invisible labor of the past and present.

Kuratomi Bhaumik's objects from the past are photographs of her mother and photographs taken by her mother, juxtaposed with the artist's own black-and-white images (purposefully taken with the same model of camera), tracing her mother's migration from Colombia to Pasadena, California.

And in Green's delicately painted large-scale ceramics, the "past" is a mythology she populates with queer, trans and Jewish bodies, using images of fungi—particularly poisonous mushrooms—as stand-ins for those erased or unrecorded histories.

Mining the past to speculate about what's next is another way to describe science fiction, and strains of sci-fi or the post-apocalyptic appear throughout BAN8, which makes sense in a region that often feels like some unasked-for version of the future. David Bayus' short 3D-animated film depicts a world controlled by a malevolent singularity fed by a farmer who more closely resembles the Terminator's endoskeleton than Grant Wood's American Gothic. Rhonda Holberton's installation/VR reiki experience reimagines the internet as a place of healing.

And then there's Sofía Córdova's uncompromising installation of video and sculpture, which one wishes were sci-fi. In the nearly two-hour video, images from her family's home in Puerto Rico mingle with narration describing their experiences during and after Hurricane Maria. Of nighttime without electricity, one voice says, "It was darkness like a wolf's mouth."

The third grouping I'd posit overlaps slightly with Córdova's bleak yet poetic dose of reality. Let's call it the everyday. The everyday is not benign, especially here in the Bay Area, but those talented enough, like the artists in BAN8, can find levity in it. Sahar Khoury's sculptures, for instance, are mainly portraits of her own pets. Porpentine Charity Heartscape's title-too-long-to-list-here game of daily mundanities is made with, the image list tells me, "computer stuff."

Less lighthearted but equally "now" are paintings by Cate White, which directly address power disparities (and how those manifest across race, gender, class and even our own interpretations of her work), and ceramics by Woody De Othello, which function as anthropomorphized objects and memorials to the dead.

There's a lot of "now more than ever" language in BAN8's accompanying publication that seeks to contextualize the work on view as responses to our current national crisis. But to do so downplays the pre-existing and ongoing practices of these artists, many of whom were sensitive to and addressed vital issues in their work long before those issues became trending news headlines.

Josh Faught, for example, describes his textiles as "urgent expressions in the slowest means possible." I love this phrase, because it accurately describes not just his intricate weavings, but everything included in BAN8. Art, design and architecture are not expedient forms of communication—they are, instead, meaningful and lasting forms of communication. Would that we had more opportunities than once every three to five years to celebrate these local, urgent expressions.

'Bay Area Now 8' opens Friday, Sept. 7 and is on view at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts through March 24, 2019.