

## Scaling Wallworks

*Wallworks*, on view now at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, delivers true to its name: eight commissioned artists have created near-monumental wall-mounted art that occupies the lower and upper floor galleries. The curatorial *premier* of Bettie-Sue Hertz, *Wallworks*—as presented in the literature of the exhibition—is both an “illumination” of the architecture of the YBCA building, created by Fumihiko Maki in 1933, as well as showcasing how artists might address either of two thematic challenges into their work: “split landscapes and culture color.” In viewing *Wallworks*, there are two main threads in which to analyze the exhibition, namely: the success in which the artists illuminate the building and/or galleries, and how, with this inaugural exhibit as example, to look forward to what Ms. Hertz will bring as the new YBCA Director of Visual Arts in the future.

The eight artists of *Wallworks* cut a wide spectrum of stature and style in the visual arts world, and the artworks themselves reflect the personality and individuality of each creator more so than any collective thought or action. Therefore, each artist successfully touches on at least one of the two themes mentioned above, and with welcomed divergence, yet it would be difficult to say whether or not these themes were chosen *because* of the artists’ signature styles, for it is still a challenge to succeed with a commission that is guaranteed an exhibition, and were any of these artists not to succeed through a tackling of the themes, well, how would that be honestly presented within the exhibition? Nonetheless, the range of resulting artwork spans systematic color and orientation destabilization (Odili Donald Odita’s *Post-Perfect*) to the monochromatic conceptual (Amanda Ross-Ho’s *Vertical Plot (Dark Matter Community Garden with Backwards Purpose)*), represented mostly in two-dimensional space, some wall sculpture, and with one more installation-oriented work by Chris Finley. Finley has connected image to wall to pillar to an occupying of open space, with his installation that traverses the grand lobby. Color string lines cut through the air and connect to what seem like spinning, fused glass and metal fragments à la digital manipulation mounted on the wall (maybe paintings, maybe drawings...). These objects-as-drawings seem inherently in flux, yet strangely tethered by the string lines...interpreted as hooked and tied to the architecture itself.

Entering the exhibit proper, the wall work of Odili Donald Odita decorates the walls and creates a tunnel-like surrounding of cascading color and shape. The geometry looks good here—the color choice and the sectional forms are balanced and have harmony—yet I continue to be re-oriented to the flatness of the walls, with no particular “new space” defined. This odd corner of gallery occupied by Odita is challenging and limiting in and of itself, possibly working against the piece.

Big geometric objects protruding from walls never fails to catch my attention, and the 2-piece artwork *The Shape of Things to Come* by Tillman Kaiser fits the bill: a deep black, multiple pyramid shaped construction, protrudes and contrasts against the organic-roundness of shapes and space-faring architecture that exists in the opposing wall painting—an other-worldly view altogether, reminiscent of vintage science fiction novel covers and modernist sentiment.

Installed on the largest of walls, the artworks of Yehudit Sasportas and Makoto Aida in Gallery 2 are so diametrically opposite in style that their contrast within the gallery space creates a peaceful indifference and lack of competition. On one hand, the over the top, exploding pop sensibility that morphs from cuteness to puke-ness, then shape-shifts from fantasy monster *manganime*<sup>TM</sup> to mass-media tabloid headlines—and then back again—by Aida seems quite personal in all its gross grossness. There is a train-of-thought underlying the randomness, and obvious cultural codes embedded here that I alone cannot crack, but standing close at the base of the wall work and looking up, I'm overwhelmed by an experience—or should I say explosion—from a mushroom cloud of media over-saturation, with both positive and negative effects.

And the on the other hand, the sonically emanating and visually reduced landscape by Yehudit Sasportas is mainly served by its bigness. I'm looking at something manipulated, a lack of ground, only outlines on a flattened plane, and concentric rings directing my attention. As in when looking through a scope and having your entire vision occupied with a single close-up viewpoint, this massive painting on the wall completely dominates to collect your perception and drive it deep into the non-horizon. It is impressive that with so little to see in the work itself, it overtakes and demands your entire field of vision. Also, the fact that Sasportas bled the black paint around the actual corner of the gallery, as a way to abolish the finite nature of the square room, shows an added sensitivity to manipulating the architecture.

Amanda Ross-Ho and Leslie Shows, installed on opposing walls in Gallery 1, pair together nicely, in that they provide both the most challenging and most rewarding wall works within the entire show. Shows—working with the two themes simultaneously—takes a near literal interpretation of split landscapes and culture color. And, one cannot help but suspect that the *Wallworks* themes originate from her particular artwork. Referencing her ongoing passion with geology and a mixed-media approach to painting, Shows incorporates flags and symbolic codes into wall-size fragmented stone waterfall of color, bleeding into cut-outs of insignia, both heraldic and geometric-abstract.

Ross-Ho plays a visual and conceptual game with the viewer: what was given has also been taken away—there *is* Art in the simple *making* of the thing—leaving the evidence of process and a “harvesting” of cultural residue. While seemingly ad hoc and a bit rough around the edges (witness the bits of canvas that have not held up against the removal of the painted objects), Ross-Ho has set up a deliberate grid with similar items, that although not always recognizable, do reference either an artist with object obsessive-ness, or an intense scrutiny of sub-culture specific forms, consciously arranged in a rectangular composition. And, I duly expect to see another work by Ross-Ho in the future that incorporates all those cut-out shapes—for labor should not be wasted.

As curator, proposing a situation where artists relate to a dominating architecture as well as thematic direction, is a bold and challenging first move for Bettie-Sue Hertz—disparate artists must appear active in the space, the artwork should embody the themes, and hopefully, the artists will seem relative to each other, and resist seeming a hodge-podge group. Where Hertz personally succeeds with this exhibit is by including artists that could either be counted on to perform an aesthetic/formal transformation of their oeuvre to the limitations presented, or who were already invested and partial to the two themes already mentioned above. And, it was a smartly hedged bet, as each artist chosen

has a proven exhibiting record, more or less guaranteeing a satisfactory result. While being bold and taking a chance on the artists to deliver, it is also smart to “game” the result.

With this single show as an example—ignoring Hertz’s previous exhibition history—there is much to “read” into *Wallworks*, which might give a window into the future path of the YBCA’s visual art program. What I read from this exhibition—and also hope is forthcoming from the new director—is an interest in young to mid-career artists (all the artists are under 45), an interest in unknown outcomes through small, imposed challenges within a proposed exhibition (by having “on site” art created within a set of themes, coupled with an interest in showing the process to creating art on equal level with the final artwork), a deep investment in understanding and reflecting on artwork and artists who work in varying mediums and concepts (Hertz herself proposed the idea as her inaugural exhibit, and her introduction to the show in combination with the written artwork/artist descriptions in the catalog show a well-researched thoughtfulness), and, an idea to include both local, regional, national and international artists together in a dialogue.

How does all this benefit the Bay Area visual arts, and why am I hopefully pleased? First, San Francisco is rightfully in a position to finally exist in an international art context, art market, etc. This is a position already identified by others, such as Jens Hoffman at CCA/Wattis Institute and Hou Hanru at SFAI. Through exhibiting both local and internationally based artists side-by-side, Hertz achieves a level of worldly relevance in the YBCA galleries, shortening the distance between them and us...and keeps YBCA on par with two other major players in the SF art scene.

Second, Hertz appears to understand that as director, she is somewhat confined by a building and galleries that are notoriously difficult to exhibit in. So, by claiming an interest in the architecture of the YBCA from the start, she includes the building as a sort of “visual partner” in the curatorial team. While giving reverence to what exists now, it sets up her ability to alter the space to her curatorial needs from now on. We will have to wait and see if and how this can manifest itself in the future. And, with Hertz considering the YBCA galleries to not only be a site in which to view installed artworks, during the *Wallworks* exhibition, Hertz has explored to what extent people are interested in viewing the art making process, overall levels of viewer participation, and how the YBCA visual arts program can extend itself beyond just a static gallery (the Big Idea Late Night Party program runs concurrent to the exhibition schedule).

Lastly, the dominant question in my mind—which isn’t completely answered by viewing *Wallworks*—is what section of Bay Area artists Bettie-Sue Hertz will continue to tap in her role as curator and director. Will Hertz, as director, stay active in allowing on-site experimentation within the YBCA galleries? To what extent do local artists have to be “known” before consideration in YBCA programming? With *Wallworks*, we see Leslie Shows and Chris Finley exhibiting, two artists established and exemplary of the Bay Area art world. But with the a burgeoning East Bay art scene, a yearly plethora of recent MFA graduates, and countless Bay Area mid-career artists already active in the art scene, how will Hertz, as curator, utilize this wide and talented pool? Will she mainly rely on what is hot in the San Francisco gallery scene as a source, or will Hertz search out and discover what exists in the lesser known crooks and crannies? In *Wallworks*, Hertz makes a point to show the viewing public both what we have in our own backyard, as

well as what is taking place beyond our foggy California coastline. It is, overall, a commendable start, and reason to keep critical attention to Bettie-Sue Hertz and the YBCA visual art programming.

Your thoughts on the *Wallworks* exhibition—and the ideas presented in this post—are welcome. Please take time to register with Artopic and join the dialogue.

SB, Oakland, October 2009 (on Artopic.org)