

DATEBOOK

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YBCA's 'Bay Area Now 8': a bad show redeemed by good art



Sahar Khoury, "Untitled (15 Esthers in pyramid on bone relief plinth)" (2018), installation view.
Photo: Charlie Villyard / Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

When a prominent art exhibition space presents a regular survey of the latest trends, it's always an occasion for critical second-guessing. I tried not to succumb to the urge, entering the eighth edition of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' triennial "Bay Area Now" with my best attempt at a beginner's mind, open to what discoveries the curators might have to share.

Based solely on the evidence presented, in the format YBCA has imposed, the Bay Area now is pretty much a bore. Thank the artists for salvaging something out of a meandering, uninspiring show.

The exhibition continues for half the coming year, through March 24. That's a long run for a show that occupies all the institution's available galleries. Coupled with the recent announcement that the primary "BAN8" curator, YBCA Director of Visual Arts Lucía Sanromán, will step down to serve "in an at-large capacity," visiting San Francisco for one week a month as she works with two co-curators on a future project, it can't bode well for what was once an energetic program.

I mention the backstory because I don't put the blame on the artists in "Bay Area Now" for its leaden mise-en-scene.

In fact, the opening gallery starts things off with a promising splash of color and visual intelligence, with mini-presentations of works by Jamil Hellu, who makes theatrical photographs in which he plays a kind of guardian to LGBTQ characters in his 2018 "hues" project; Taravat Talepasand, whose **takeoffs on Islam**,

politics and celebrity are the epitome of iconoclasm; and **Sahar Khoury**, who gives us sculptural descriptions of domestic animals in somber, if not quite accusatory, attitudes.

Koury's "Untitled (15 Esthers in pyramid on bone relief plinth)" (2018), placed at the center of a small fountain visible through a glass wall, is a stuttering, dreamlike vision of a fluffy little creature — a wall label tells us Esther is the artist's dog — heroicized, an avatar of pride and empowerment. It is the standout object in the show, both for its haunting aspect and its brilliant placement.

Near the entry gallery, Cate White's paintings are full of confident ambition, free association and historical allusion. Her "The Keys to the City + Addendum" (2016) relates its contemporary story line to the 1634-35 work "The Surrender of Breda" by Diego Velázquez, but the style is a mashup closer to James Ensor's "Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889," painted in 1888.

There are other strong artists included, but the exhibition seems to actively work against many of them. In the same room with White's expressionist outpouring, Woody De Othello's grand ceramic "Rest in Power, Let It Not Be in Vain" (2018) **struggles for our attention**, notwithstanding its large scale and funereal tone. It seems forgotten in a corner, and its mostly gray color gets no help from inadequate lighting. The safety requirement that its memorial candles remain unlit does not help, either.

And that leads to my problem with the exhibition and the institution, in general. YBCA keeps getting out ahead of itself, attempting — and promising — more than it can deliver. A case in point is this year's decision to make a big deal of including architects and designers "working at the leading edge of environmental, landscape and housing design."

I have no beef with casting a wide net. Art is art, regardless of medium, and some of the most exciting visual thinking today is taking place in the design arena. But the show makes no convincing aesthetic or conceptual case for its designer/architect inclusions, which amount to nearly a quarter of the exhibition participants, other than a claim that they practice "*in-between* thinking ... in the face of gentrification, growing inequities and xenophobia, global climate change and other dire conditions."

With due respect to the designers and architects, the context provided here is simply wrong for much of their work. Too many pieces with too many differing approaches are scattered about the center's largest gallery, or hung in faraway corridors that don't even seem a part of the exhibition. And then there are the tech problems: In visits over three separate days, one augmented reality piece was never fully operational, and a virtual reality work repaid little of the effort and extensive instruction from an attendant required to experience it.

Darell W. Fields, who counts himself among the architects, makes the most visually and conceptually demanding contribution with a series of what appear to be proposals for structures modeled on African American hairstyles. There's a more expansive art exhibition in his architectural approach, and I look forward to seeing it.

And then there's the uncategorizable video and sculptural work of David Bayus, whose "Psyman's Acres" (2018) is as carefully engineered as any architectural masterwork. In 23 minutes he describes a horrid future world of half-pneumatic, half-biotic creatures that we are pleased we will never know.

"Bay Area Now 8": 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays; Thursdays until 8 p.m. Through March 24. \$10. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F. 415-978-2700. <https://ybca.org>

