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Galleries outside the mainstream but worth the effort



The Bay Area's scrappier art exhibition venues can be a challenge to visit. There are spaces open only one or two afternoons a week, and ones that see virtually all their traffic on a single opening night. There's even a place that serves as a part-time home and then, for public hours, is completely transformed into a white-box gallery. I recently stopped at the Luggage Store and San Francisco Camerawork, two venerable nonprofits that sit side by side on a still-recovering stretch of Market Street. Both are upstairs from the street, and you ring a doorbell for entry. Well after the published opening time, the Luggage Store did not respond. When I returned 30 minutes later, I

was asked to view one exhibition until the second was available: Someone had brought home the laptop with the essential video, and he was late for work.

Next door at Camerawork, a handwritten note read, "DOORBELL BROKEN. CALL: (415) 487-1011." I called and was beckoned up the steep stairs. A pleasant attendant greeted me on the second floor: "Welcome to the not-for-profit world."

Look closely: The rewards of a visit, though, can repay the effort many times over. The exhibition surrounding me at Camerawork — Sanaz Mazinani's "Signal to Noise," which runs through April 22 — was anything but provisional. And both shows at the Luggage Store, designed to look in-process, were of special note.

Most of the objects on view are montages of what must be thousands of individual photographic images, digitally stitched together into dazzling symmetrical designs. The patterns remind one of stained glass windows or — nearer in cultural context for the Iranian-born San Francisco artist — Persian mosaics. The angled supports on which they are impeccably mounted might be corners of rooms into which we peer or, taken as independent sculptural forms, vaguely aeronautic objects suggesting radar dishes, drones or advanced jet airplanes.

Close inspection (bring your reading glasses, if not a magnifier) reveals the tiny picture-tiles to be news photographs. In two works called "Redacted March" (#1 and #3, 2011 and 2013), long processions of flag-draped coffins are discernible. We are reminded that such pictures were censored by the Defense Department for nearly two decades, until the Obama administration lifted the ban in 2009. "Explosion" (2013) glories in the visual attractions of multiple fiery bomb bursts against a clear sky. "Trump on TV" (2016) references the visual ubiquity of the then-presidential candidate.

Mazinani's photographic works describe the thrill and vivid colors of media saturation, even as they obliterate content and dull detail. They are brilliant, precisely because they leave nothing behind but empty excitement.

Domestic disturbances: Sahar Khoury's exhibition at the Luggage Store fills a substantial gallery, and it's a killer. By that I mean it is twisted and unpredictable in all the best ways, but also that some of her works are knifed apart. One work was finished off with gunshots.

Khoury shows off a wide range of technical experiment, from hand-formed ceramic to cast cement to papier-mache. These are unconventionally combined, whether together or with scraps of found materials. The works often reference the domestic — vase forms on stands, paintings pieced together from old clothing — but they can also be abstract in unbalanced, unnatural ways.

All of them are rough, some brutal, like adolescent products of a violently dysfunctional home. A gang of free-standing integers, each the height of a woman and woozily anchored by a heavy metal or poured concrete footing, occupies the center of the gallery. A handout says the work is untitled, but it sorts the numbers into spans of years ("1948/1995, 1953/1979") that "mark nationality and memory formation in Iranian and Palestinian histories." It doesn't take Wikipedia to know that these were periods of instability and violence, of clashing cultures and splintered social structures.

Surrealist documents: On another floor at the Luggage Store, Anne Walsh shows a puzzling collection of notes and documents at one end of a long room, opposite a video wall at the other end. With some effort, we glean that this could be a film or book one day, centered on a particular work by a certain key figure of Surrealism. I will not play the spoiler. It is clearly a very personal project for the artist, and absorbing on that psychological level.

Western tales: Jules Maeght Gallery has for more than two years pursued a vigorous program just outside the media spotlight. That may be a consequence of its location in a zone better known for dining than art viewing. More likely it stems from an eclectic, hard-to-pin-down program. But it is always worth a visit.

The current exhibition, "Bitter Creek Sweet Water," teases out a proclivity for themes of the American West in the work of four San Francisco artists: Marshall Elliott, Paul Kos, Isabelle Sorrell and Christopher Upham. The show is marked by a strong conceptual bent and not a little humor. Watch where you step.