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No hidin' SECA

Searching for thematic threads at the biennial exhibition

By Glen Helfand

REVIEW Each SECA Art Award exhibition, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's biennial and only official nod to Bay Area artists, is cause to revisit the curious, contested idea of place in contemporary art. In his introduction to the 2006 SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) Award catalog, SFMOMA director Neal Benezra describes the exhibition as a "lens focusing on the best that the San Francisco Bay Area has to offer." That's a tough order that the curators, Janet Bishop and Tara McDowell, with input from the SECA group, bestowed on five artists, Sarah Cain, Kota Ezawa, Amy Franceschini, **Mitzi Pederson**, and Leslie Shows. Do they — should they — illuminate a sense of regionality, what critic Lucy Lippard dubs "a state of mind rather than a place on the map"?

Any way you enter the third floor of SFMOMA, you're faced with SECA artists. From the stairs you'll see large collage paintings by Shows, landscapes that appear chemically ravaged. Via the elevator, you immediately encounter Pederson's 2005 sculpture of gray cinder-block fragments stacked like a low-slung house of cards. On the floor at the entry to the gallery proper, there's Cain's small pile of leaves painted black and subdued rainbow shades. These three artists share a similar practice of transforming humble materials into something almost magical and begin to articulate an aesthetic — or state of mind — that, to various degrees, is emphatically handmade and poetic. The inclusion of the more widely exhibited Ezawa, who makes computer-rendered, cartoonlike still and video images, and Franceschini, known for digital graphics and ecoconscious public projects, however, subverts the idea of a thematic thread.

The 2004 SECA exhibition focused on artists who worked primarily in drawing in very different ways, a strategy that gave the show a sense of structure and created a dialogue between works. The current group feels more fractured; the whole seems less than the sum of its parts.

Shows and Pederson complement each other most effectively. With extensive use of meticulously collaged printed matter and paint, Shows creates sweeping, epic images of landscapes that seem to have gone through geologic shifts and been layered with kaleidoscopic chemicals. The show also includes a new series of smaller, text-based works in which she's carefully shredded texts, unlikely selections such as Edwin Abbott's mathematical fantasy Flatland, and ripped pieces of canvas bookbinding, fusing them into ambiguous wholes.

Her muted, earthy color schemes merge well with Pederson's cinder blocks, which are dusted with slate-colored glitter and resemble glam-rock geodes. Her other pieces, positioned near Cain's, employ featherweight materials, such as wood veneer and fluttering strips of tinted cellophane, to explore physical tension and tentative presence — the work is emphatically fragile and deceptively offhand.

There's an improvisatory feel to Cain's work that doesn't quite flower in this setting. She scores with a wonderful site-specific installation: a tree branch dynamically merges with the wall and architecture, using the floor, shadow, and abstract spray-paint squiggles. Titled *We Push Ourselves into the Mountain Until We Explode into the Sky*, the piece embraces its earthy-spiritual vibes but seems anything but hokey. Her framed paintings on paper, which also contain natural elements and metallic sequins and threads, are less consistently assured and sometimes overwrought. Next to the tree, these seem trapped under glass.

You could ascribe a similar feeling to the presentation of Franceschini's off-site project to resurrect San Francisco's official Victory Garden program of the 1940s. The piece makes real sense in food activist Northern California during wartime. The project also exemplifies a strain of socially based art that's thriving in SF galleries and art schools. This sort of practice, however, unfolds in streets, gardens, and ephemeral interactions and consistently engenders the challenge to create effective gallery presentations. At SFMOMA, Franceschini presents historical civic documents, spiffy new charts, prototype gardening and seed bank gear, and a video of a planting party. While these communicate the gist of this vital idea, the display feels stranded here: it may have been better served with a component that unfolded more directly in the gallery or in an exhibition with contextualizing, like-minded projects.

Bringing an animated Colorforms effect to the notorious Pamela Anderson–Tommy Lee bootleg sex tape, Ezawa wisely expands his artistic purview. In earlier pieces, including the *History of Photography Remix* series, examples of which are seen here, iconic images and media events become broad, deadpan cartoons. Instant recognition of the material has been key. In his new double-screen piece, *Two Stolen Honeymoons Are Better Than One*, a well-known but less widely seen piece of media — the aforementioned home video — pushes Ezawa's work into more ambiguous territory, that strange zone in which celebrities, albeit naked ones with supersize body parts, seem as banal as the rest of us. Doubled to two screens and tinted in divergent hues, the scenario enters the subconscious with the kind of off-color lens that just might be in the Bay Area atmosphere — or perhaps just in this artist's eye.