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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER



The cast-bronze banana peels in Tammy Rae Carland's "Make 'em Laugh" series are among the standouts of the "Bay Area Now 6" exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.\

David Huffman puts his own spin on color-field abstraction with works like "Meth Pearl" and "I'm Never Coming Down."

"Bay Area Now 6" at Yerba Buena Center: art review

[Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic](#)

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I can imagine an exhibition "showcasing the artistic and intellectual rigor of the Bay Area," as the publicity says, but it would not look much like "Bay Area Now 6," the triennial survey at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Start by subtracting everything here except the work of Weston Teruya, Brion Nuda Rosch, Mauricio Ancalmo, Chris Fraser, Sean MacFarland and the sculpture of Tammy Rae Carland. Her cast bronze banana peels rank as instant classics, even minus the warm-up act that her staged photographs offer.

Fraser's installation - a horizontal slit in the wall of an enclosure that diffracts incident light from a window and a series of bare bulbs - shows how easily unpredictable complexity can be coaxed from simple interventions in existing situations. Besides positioning itself in a history of "light and space" art long identified with California, Fraser's "Developing a Mutable Horizon," as it changes with the time of day, silently asserts the availability of meaningful aesthetic experience in the vast peripheral field of the unnoticed.

Teruya makes painted paper constructions that masquerade as jumbled installations. Jumping between literal and model-making scale, hinting at narrative structure, then sabotaging it, his stasis pieces interact dynamically with viewers' expectations, all the while instructing us in the fragility of the actual world they reference.

McFarland's landscape photographs - are they very long nighttime exposures, darkened further by tinted glass? - demand that we relearn to look at pictures, and to connect seeing with believing, or else to withhold the requisite patience. He thus positions us as viewers in terms that also orient us within a wider 21st century cultural frame. We have only to recognize it.

Ancalmo makes a stab at something similar - a dubious artistic success, I think, but an unforgettably entertaining one. His "Dualing Pianos: Agapç Agape in D Minor" (2011) has two old player pianos sonically linking through found piano rolls that appear also to pass through an antique word processor. It evokes William Gaddis' posthumously published novella that takes the form of a dying man's tirade against the mechanizing and democratizing of once-skillful performance symbolized by the player piano.

The overall profile of "BAN6" makes little sense to me, as does the bizarre trajectory of YBCA's 2011 multidisciplinary programming. To cover everything on offer there this year, and to trace its thematic architecture, would require the coerced dedication of some graduate student in a multidisciplinary arts program. How I hope someone has taken it on.

Certain themes do suggest themselves - personal and cultural identity; collaboration, both among artists and between them and an audience; activist critique; and humor - but even intertwined, these threads hardly set the Bay Area arts apart.

The YBCA team appears to believe that the truth of our cultural moment lies in overload, and that they perform a public service by offering it. This reminds me of the critic Donald Kuspit's contention, some years ago, that the complexity of our situation demanded gnarled, burdensome description and analysis because nothing less could accurately reflect the going reality. Clarity would merely indicate a lack of information, a failure of intelligence or some form of complicity.

By no means would I dismiss all the work in "BAN6" that I have failed to mention so far.

Painter David Huffman has fined down his extended allegory of African American aspiration and self-discovery into a sort of color-field abstraction that may make little sense to people unfamiliar with his work, but which I find pleasing and moving.

In these pictures, Huffman uses the basketball - distinguished from more numerous monochrome circles only by a few lines - as a symbol of African American social elevation, euphoria and, potentially, of a transfigured world.

Huffman has reinvented the abstract pictorial space of color-field painting as a field of dreams, not forgetting their flip side, nightmares: See his titles. He demonstrates a sweet and confident artistic economy too little in evidence in "BAN6." (Carland's banana peels have it.)

We might at least expect "BAN6" to calibrate a level of sophistication to which all the work in it would rise in its own terms. But no.

Labat has contributed the neon marijuana leaf that adorns YBCA's entrance, along with a giant sticker over its exhibition banner, bearing a translation of *yerba buena*: good weed. If only the show inside lived up to that promise.

Bay Area Now 6: Part II - Art: Triennial survey of Bay Area visual arts: painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation works. Through Sept. 25. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. (415) 978-2787, www.ybca.org. E-mail Kenneth Baker at kennethbaker@schronicle.com.