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BAN 6 @ YBCA

What do bronze-cast banana peels, biker quilts and a bloody shaving encounter with a lumberjack's axe have in common? They're all in Bay Area Now 6 (BAN6), the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' triennial group showcase of what's hot in Bay Area art. This year's exhibition features work that ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous and from failed comedy to philosophical musings on nature.

BAN6's stated purpose is to showcase experimental work, new talent, and fresh perspectives in Bay Area art, and in that regard it succeeds. The curators also claim to reflect upon the "mélange of communities and micro-cultures" the Bay Area has to offer, and that's where the show stalls. While it's an art feast, it's over-reaching and all-encompassing, almost to the point of sheer randomness. Simply presenting a multitude of trends in Bay Area art and culture doesn't add up to a curatorial focus. Nonetheless, there's a lot worth looking at.

For starters, Tammy Rae Carland's series of photographs, *I'm Dying Up Here*, features comediennes performing solo comic routines, but there's little humor to be found here; awkwardly gesticulating in the harsh glare of stage lights, the female comics are portrayed experiencing their worst nightmare: bombing onstage. There's an emotional charge to Carland's best images, but apart from the visual joke of the bronze-cast banana peels and a few of the more poignant photographs, the over-extended series occupies too much space, ironically becoming a one-liner.

Chris Sollars' multi-channel performance/video installation, *Hairy*, is about hair—more specifically his hairiness and eventual hairlessness—and veers between offbeat humor and unsettling violence; it ends with an almost ritualistic, bloody beard purging in the woods with an axe blade. The tension Sollars's awkward emotional rollercoaster elicits in viewers is palpable: is this supposed to be funny, ridiculous, thoughtful or just downright insane? In the end it's all of the above and quite masterful in its effect.

Suzanne Husky's "sleeper cells," are spiky wooden dwellings made entirely from reclaimed materials. The Sleeper Cell Hotel modules are striking curiosities: functioning both as alternative shelters and as a call to environmental activism. Unfortunately, the unnecessarily comedic and over-stylized accompanying video presentation (starring Doug Garth Williams, a wonderful artist, but one whose talents were misused here), and the extensive collection of activist books and signs all but undermine the effect.

By splintering the outside light and shadows into bands of radiating color and value through a narrow horizontal slit in the wall of his installation space, Chris Fraser's *Developing A Mutable Horizon* places us in an intangible moment. The darkened, immersive space operates like a life-size pinhole camera, where, standing inside of it, you experience a heightened awareness of fleeting changes in light, shadow and fragmented silhouettes developing in the space around you.

Sean McFarland's dark, monochromatic photographs portray nature enigmatically; we catch glimpses of wild places, such as a wooded grove or dense forest undergrowth emerging out of an ambient gloom, their strangeness enhanced by the deliberately dim lighting of the installation. It's unfortunate that the soundtrack from Richard T. Walker's nearby installation overlaps into McFarland's space, cutting into the quiet, contemplative mood that his work establishes.

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That said, the two artists' works are conceptually related; the difference is that Walker's three-channel video installation, *The Speed and Eagerness of Meaning*, approaches nature playfully. In it, the artist stands before an awe-inspiring desert vista, while a tinny-sounding incantation about the futility of narrative description plays on a tape recorder: "It isn't long before you see it as a scene and you unwittingly build distinctions, context and even narrative," a voice (presumably that of artist) intones. Entering deeper into the landscape, he becomes further disillusioned with his attempts to analyze and quantify the surroundings: "He can't describe anything he sees because nothing fits into words anymore," at which point he abandons his tape recorder and starts playing instruments. The soundtrack gradually builds into a melodic harmony of drums, banjo and voices that creates the emotional connection that words failed to establish. The larger paradox is that while articulating his perceptions as narrative is inadequate, making art about it is even more so. When we make art about touching nature, it's doomed to failure. Knowing this, Walker does it anyway, and with his seamless interplay of performance, video, and music, he gets away with it.

Other artists in the show employ the symbolic and psychological possibilities of landscape. In Ranu Mukherjee's *Color of History – Sweating Rocks*, an animated desert landscape in the oil-producing Middle East becomes a literal and metaphorical embodiment of change. The suggested forms of desert nomads crouch in the sand, and vibrant tent fabrics billow uncontrollably in the wind. The scene completely transforms with the emergence of abstract, black tendrils that ooze like a terrible oil spill, gradually engulfing everything in their path; but the oil forms become a cosmos, populated with thousands of radiating stars. This animation—the strongest piece in the show—is a richly layered hybrid tapestry that suggests that in the chaos of globalization the known and unknown, tradition and modernity, must and do coexist, and that the unfolding realities even have transcendental possibilities.

Robert Minervi takes a very different approach to landscape in his paintings of futuristic urban environments. Modernist busts, pets, potted plants and interior furnishings occupy the foreground, while the interior space quickly dissolves out into exterior cityscapes of distant high-rises and construction sites. Everything is unfixed, floating and in a state of change in these dream-like urban spaces.

There's an interesting parallel between **Weston Teruya's** exquisite paper sculpture investigating the questionable land appropriation of the former LA County Poor Farm, and Amy Balkin's series of documents portraying some unlikely land giveaways, such as the one involving one-inch parcels of land on a Texas ranch promulgated by a cereal company. The documentation includes a photograph of the one-inch plots—the land divided into a grid with string—and people searching for their plot, like the proverbial needle in the haystack. The overall effect suggests that every inch of American land has been up for grabs, fought over, claimed, owned and controlled.

Elsewhere, Mauricio Ancalmo's melancholy installation, *Dualing Pianos: Agapé Agape in D Minor*, a play on words, references the title of a novel by William Gaddis; it's an endless, futile performance of obsolescent technologies: two player pianos and an electric typewriter. Brion Nuda Rosch's installation of objects, collages and paintings is aptly titled, *Objects Significance Removed, Part 3*. Allison Smith submits American-craft inspired sculpture and collages, while David Huffman's Afro-futurist dot paintings appear as formalist abstractions with basketballs. Tony Labat's neon marijuana leaf sign explains the meaning of Yerba Buena (good herb). Rio Babe International's World Fair 2011 installation, which claims to be "posh and slummy, local and international, found and fabricated, rich and poor, digital and hand-crafted, culty and friendly, tacky and tasteful, old and future" turns out to be all that and more, which is to say, confusing. Ben Venom's heavy-metal inspired hand sewn quilts are novel juxtapositions of craft and popular culture, but don't really go much beyond the sum of their parts.

The same might also be said of the entire show; but the parts, ill-fitting as they are, still merit a good, long look.

–RACHEL CLARKE