

Images from the past make you think deeply about living in the now

BY ED BOWERS

ON Aug. 3, as the late afternoon sun descended, I arrived at SomArts for a gallery opening titled "Re-1960-1980," presenting the work of numerous SoMa artists in those years. I went with an open mind hoping to be moved and enlightened. I even wore a white shirt and pretty tie so that I would appear respectfully civilized among the sensitive citizens of higher culture.

But, upon entering, I observed a long line of culture vultures extending to what appeared to be a table laden with wine and cheese and grapes and tiny items of food. This scene brought to mind the food line at St. Anthony's in the Tenderloin. It's quite long.

Within a spacious room, paintings and sculptures were displayed, eye candy created from the human mind. Most of the eyes observing the art were talking to each other with mouths and using the artists' creations as springboards for conversation. I liked that. Good art should stir up good conversations, riots, revolutions, domestic disputes, spiritual epiphanies, and dig deep into the entrails of the human soul to come up with gold. Amen.

The first painting that attracted my attention was an enormous canvas. It is common to observe large objects first. People are natural-born size queens. The artist of this work must

have invested a lot of money in his project because the canvas on which his paint was displayed was longer than my bedroom wall. It was titled "Relay," painted in 1980 by Douglas Gower.

There's no doubt that Gower has talent. Anyone who can get exhibited at a prestigious gallery must know what he is doing. But his work will remain a mystery to me. I am ignorant.

"Relay" looked to me as though painted by a child having a temper tantrum who decided to splatter paint on their white bedroom wall. Had Gower done this style first, he'd be categorized as avant-garde and innovative. Or was it Jackson Pollock who did it first? I'm confused.

But the bottom line is that I am highly suspicious of art that even I can do, because if I can do it, anybody can. Also, I think that it's rather rude for a painting that appears to represent food spilled directly out of a can to take up so much space. It's like being served a giant sloppy Joe at a gourmet restaurant.

On the other end of the spectrum, I was moved and impressed by two photographs displayed of the work of Ira Nowinski.

One of his pieces, dated 1972, is titled "Catman." It is the photograph of a middle-age African American man lying prone in a shirt and coat with his head resting on his hand,

wearily eyes full of pain and disappointment revealing a demeanor of deep sadness. The wisdom and acceptance etched on his face added up to the portrait of a life partially lived to the fullest within the parameters prescribed for it.

The simple starkness of this black and white photograph allows the viewer to easily see into the man's soul. His anonymity is transformed into someone universal. I talked to an old broke-down blues singer in a bar yesterday who reminds me of the gentleman in this photo.

Too bad I didn't have a camera. The other photograph displayed by Nowinski, dated 1974, is titled "Last Resident West Hotel." It depicts a middle-age, balding, white man with his back turned to the camera, a fire escape sign over his head with a hand drawn on it whose finger is extended to the exit door.

"Time to go, Sir. Life is change. Your suit coat used to be sharp. But now it's seedy. Turn your back to the audience and leave. We have plans that do not include your low-rent life. You are dead."

Then I stood in front of a sculpture by David Ng titled "Stand Here." It appeared to be a spindly wire that emanated a cute animated spindly persona standing on an oval of yellow and green. It made me smile.

"Art Accident," by Michael Lipsey, dated

2005, had words painted on it that stated, "Art is dangerous. An artist has nothing. An artist has a bad attitude." There was a mirror on it that reflected the real work of art, my legs. If I was shorter I could see other parts of my body. If I was taller I could see my feet. But either way a mirror only reflects a partial view, as do artists.

So I found this piece to be a multidimensional, rather intellectual comment on the nature of art, and I appreciated its thoughtfulness and humor. Lipsey reflected his vision in a simple and direct way.

But Michael Lipsey is obviously a lazy, frustrated writer because his other work also had words and came equipped with a mirror. The words around the mirror informed the viewer that "there isn't always sex but there is always chocolate."

That's when I began to suspect that the subject of this art show was really about food. For instance, I observed a tiny teacup Chihuahua being held in the arms of a portly woman who was stationed near the refreshment stand. I wonder what it was thinking. Dogs love food!

Then I walked up to another dog in the gallery who looked like a short broom without a stick and had cute sad eyes. The dog appeared innocent and worried and lost in the mystery of this event. Perhaps it was hungry.

Hats off to this gallery for allowing some-

thing other than human life to attend.

Most human beings are as clueless as dogs, but they pretend not to be. Artists, on the other hand, make a valiant attempt to see beneath the surface, between the lines, or at least I hope they do.

Too many of them preach to small congregations. But I suppose that is because they are as basically frightened and as confused as the broom dog that I observed patiently standing at the feet of his mistress when it probably really wanted to be outdoors chasing and eating rats.

Artists need company. Artists need support. Artists need to feel less alone.

But we can't always get what we need, and therein lies a real inspiration for artistic expression.

I truly believe art is created by sensitive people who wish to express themselves in a culture where indifference to the other has made anomie almost a religion. Therefore, I would suggest, for the sake of all sentient beings, that this show be viewed.

Don't ignore the message even if it is flawed.

Exposure to a multitude of images from the past is worthwhile because it brings out in the present what it is to feel and think deeply about the experience of living here on Planet Earth in the now. Even the works that I didn't like caused me insight. ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

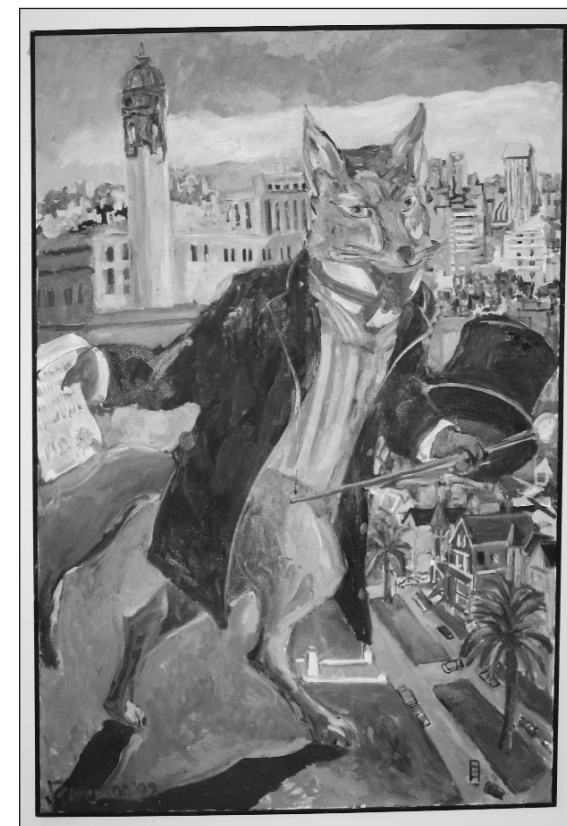
Sculpture by David Ng titled "Stand Here."

When SoMa art was hot — artists recall the heyday

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through planning. And the Budget and Finance Committee that Daly chairs put \$1.5 million in the current city budget "to increase support for local artists."

The SoMa story began with the end of the Beat era in the 1950s. Artists who had come to North



"Greed," an oil painting by Jack Freeman.

SOUTHSIDE

Beach and the Embarcadero to try the much publicized Bohemian lifestyle eventually saw their cheap studio space usurped by creeping gentrification and urban renewal. Many gravitated to SoMa, a blue-collar area rich with flophouses, cheap restaurants, the city's Three Street skid row and vacant, light industrial spaces and warehouses.

"The shift from bulk shipping to containerization emptied the warehouses and they rented for practically nothing," Behanna says.

Communes grew up around the city. Some south of Market Street were called projects. Artists took over entire buildings. Project Artaud at 17th Street and Alabama, once an American Can Co. building, is the biggest still standing.

It was a time, too, when art school graduates, in keeping with hippie freedom and experimentation, shunned gallery protocol.

"The Art Institute people didn't want the downtown gallery scene," said Brian McPartlon, "and they went out on their own. Many artists wouldn't conform to that slick look. If your art wasn't perfectly square and in the right frame they weren't interested."

Artists started their open studios in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the leading, casual "alternative spaces" for neighborhood artists were 63 Bluxome and 80 Langton St. Chronicle art critic Thomas Albright went to many studios and wrote reviews. He is one of 10 people, now deceased, who were acknowledged at the exhibit on a gallery wall for their support.

"The nexus of the artists exodus came in the form of the South of Market Redevelopment Plan of 1981," says Behanna. Among other changes came a work/live code that tightened codes on old buildings and spiked rents. SoMa started losing artists. It was easier in some cases to raze a building and build pricey lofts. The influx later of dot commers was the coup de gras as evicted artists continued to

flee, a surprising number, Freeman says, to the out-reaches of Marin County.

The SoMa studios remaining are Freeman's, 63 Bluxome and Gustavo Rivera's at Folsom and Norfolk, he says.

Freeman is proud of the diversity of the show. The offering wasn't gallery-oriented and "there's something defiant about it," he says. Artists of the period who "made it big," such as internationally known plaster sculptor Manuel Neri and kinetic sculptor Fletcher Benton, weren't invited. Freeman asked artists for two pieces, one old, one new and they came from as far away as New York, Peoria and Salt Lake City.

Sculptor Dave Maclay, who held possibly the first open studio at his Bryant Street digs in the 1960s, flew in from England to help push the show along. Freeman extended the parameters for invitations to include nearby Artaud artists of the period such as Bill McElhiney, Zhdan Rudnyckyj and Ken Cooper.

If there's one piece that evokes the story behind the reShow it's Freeman's 5-by-4-foot oil painting of a sly gray fox looking quite pleased. On two feet, dressed in a tuxedo and carrying a top hat and cane, he prances over San Francisco. It's titled "Greed," a bit obvious, but nicely wrought.

Opening night was emotional. The "re," Latin for going backward, stood for reunion, and scores of artists who hadn't seen each other in years, reconnected, reminisced and behaved like artists.

"We drank eight cases of wine," Behanna said. "Six red, two white. That tells you something about artists."

At some point, Channel 29 will air the panel discussion in four 25-minute segments and show some of the exhibition. Panelists were Behanna, Freeman, McPartlon, SomArts Gallery Director and moderator Betsie Miller-Kucz, artists Flicka McGurrin and Nancy Frank and SomArts Director Jack Davis. SomArts has arranged with the community television station and Mobile Access Studio to document select SomArts activities. This is the first. ■

Cameras urged for U.N., Hallidie plazas, Taylor St.

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"I have legitimate reservations. This is just more (invasion) from the efforts of George W. Bush."

Daly said the cameras in District 6 will "just move crime up a block."

The Alliance for a Better District 6, the Community Leadership Alliance, Capt. Brown and dozens of residents at TL neighborhood meetings sought the surveillance cameras to battle rampant drug-dealing and violence. The first time the cameras were suggested was Aug. 5, 2005, at a Tenant Associations Coalition of San Francisco meeting, according to its president, Michael Nulty. "It was an idea Darryl Smaw of the Mayor's Office of Economic Development brought up as a way to bring in more business to the neighborhood."

The mayor hopes the cameras can stem street slayings in the Western Addition and Bayview. But in August, the Tenderloin was jolted, too, with three killings. A survey released that month said 51% of Tenderloin residents felt unsafe or somewhat unsafe in their own neighborhood. The Community Survey on Public Safety by the San Francisco Safety Network, a nonprofit composed of district-based community organizers, compiled 2,379 surveys during one month in March-April. Just being on the street, 72% said, made them feel unsafe or somewhat unsafe, according to the report. The respondents said drug use and sales was the top contributor to the condition.

CAMERAS ON WITH NO ONE WATCHING

But June 13, the Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance by Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, whose district includes the Western Addition, that limits the "community safety cameras" as a spy tool, at least compared with how other cities use them. San Francisco would allow no monitoring screens for the cameras. In Chicago, New York, Baltimore and Los Angeles, police watch monitors linked to street cameras and respond to what they see.

The Mirkarimi ordinance regulating the digital recording surveillance system has nothing to do with cameras of other city departments that monitor such things as the city dump, airport, Muni facilities and schools. A crime pattern and place determine what kind of camera will be used. The IPIX, for example, is immobile but can capture images 360 degrees simultaneously, and can zoom in on faces

and license plate numbers. But the cameras don't record sound.

All cameras would send digital images 24/7 to the Department of Telecommunications and Information Services on Turk Street. Images are stored for 14 days, then deleted. In that time period, only police with the rank inspector or higher can request image copies. For other city agencies to get records, it takes a court order.

"Police working from reports have to believe a crime occurred at a certain time to pursue this," Nance said. "Our position is that it doesn't pose a threat to civil liberties. No individual is looking at a monitor. And we are going through a public process. In other more proactive jurisdictions, it has been upheld."

A DETERRENT, NOT A TOOL

"I think the cameras can be used as a deterrent. They are not used as a tool to deploy and prevent impending crimes. They're a passive tool."

The Board of Supervisors voted 9-2 to approve the surveillance cameras in the 2006-07 mayor's budget; Supervisors Jake McGoldrick and Daly voted no.

Throughout the city, 22 new surveillance cameras worth \$275,000 are to be installed, supplementing the 33 already installed since July 2005 and funded by drug money confiscations.

Nance said if the commission approves his TL recommendations, the plaza cameras would go in before the year's end and the O'Farrell camera early in 2007.

Surveillance cameras here got a boost in June 2005 when Mayor Newsom visited Chicago where there are 2,300 police-monitored cameras, the most in any U.S. city. Newsom returned impressed and after three killings in the Western Addition a year ago July, the city installed its first two pilot surveillance cameras outside a public housing project where residents said drugs and gun violence were rampant.

In October, the mayor told a District 6 Town Hall meeting at the Gene Friend Rec Center how effective the cameras were in Chicago, while conceding he had reservations about violating citizens' privacy.

But a report soon afterward that the Western Addition cameras had deterred illegal activity led to a flood of neighborhood requests. Nance told The Extra the first cameras at Eddy and Buchanan had

reduced crime 30%. So 31 more cameras were eventually added in the Western Addition, Bayview-Hunters Point, Bernal Heights, Vis Valley, in the Mission and on Alemany. The mayor said they would be removed after 90 days from the time they were put in, if residents demanded it.

The system in Chicago that had impressed Newsom was bankrolled in part with a \$5 million U.S. Department of Homeland Security grant. Anti-crime software in a command center detects "suspicious" activity through high-definition cameras with night vision that are mounted on buildings and light poles and can spin 360 degrees. They can track a fleeing criminal and spot a broken water main.

Chicago officials said they studied camera systems in Las Vegas, the Pentagon and London, home of the haunts of George Orwell, whose book *1984* introduced Big Brother. The average Londoner, it is said, is viewed by 300 cameras a day.

The Illinois ACLU, agreeing that there is no expectation of privacy on a city street, did not oppose the cameras.

In Los Angeles, the police said in April that the city's 24 recently installed surveillance cameras on downtown streets helped them make 200 arrests, including an average of 40 drug busts a month. Two officers work in a converted holding cell at Central Division headquarters watching their camera-linked monitors. With keypad and joysticks, they zoom in on live images, looking mainly for drug deals they can dispatch a patrol to bust.

DIFFERENT STORY IN CHICAGO

MOCJ's Nance said Chicago police can sometimes respond before a crime is committed.

"If gangs are meeting and flying colors," Nance said, "it's possible to get there before anything happens and disperse the crowd."

Even so, the Chicago model has changed life. Nance said there's a two-mile strip on Chicago Avenue with strobe lights flashing 24 hours a day atop huge camera boxes on buildings.

"I don't feel like that's Big Brother," he said. "But it's more intrusive than we want our system to be."

If the commission approves the cameras, four signs 30-by-30 inches within 100 feet of the cameras' proposed locations will announce their arrival. Whether they are worth their salt will show up in a Police Department report to the Police Commission and the Board of Supervisors after one year. ■