



Asian Art Museum

A work in the exhibition "The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe," through Jan. 15.

VISUAL ART

By Charles Desmarais

What a year for art. In terms of facilities, it began with the opening of the Bay Area's only historic house dedicated to an artist and ended with the launch of the region's only purpose-built teaching museum. And the art ranged from a smartly ridiculous interplanetary trip to sweetly intent meditation on nature and an emperor of ancient Rome.

The year ended on a painful and somber note, with the loss of 36 creative people in the Oakland Ghost Ship fire. The event leaves us with a sobering contrast: an image of artists and arts groups struggling to subsist in the Bay Area, against the backdrop of glitz and glamour that is the global art scene we aspire to join.

Museums — a rich array:

The reopening of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art would lead a top 10 list not just for the past 12 months but for the decade: A \$305 million expansion gave the city a widely envied new collection of art, a fine building and a huge boost in international profile. In any merely extraordinary year, the unveiling of UC Berkeley's stunning new building for the Berkeley Art Museum and

Art continues on page 20

COVER STORY

Art from page 19

Pacific Film Archive would have been the big news. And the new Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis set out to prove that a museum can be both monument and education center; one critic called it “a building to boost your faith in the future of American architecture.”

“Bruce Conner: It’s All True”: By the measure of the breadth of his vision, his uncompromising stance and his deeply tapped roots in San Francisco’s idiosyncratic history, Bruce Conner is the Bay Area’s most significant artist. SFMOMA’s sweeping exhibition, produced in partnership with New York’s Museum of Modern Art, is a model retrospective. Its 18 galleries, along with a 384-page tome, provide context without attempting to explain the inexplicable among 300-plus works spanning a career of more than 50 years. That’s a lot of art to see, but the music and movement of interspersed film and video set a syncopated pace. We may be looking at collections of painting, sculpture, prints, drawings and photographs, but it’s a show we can dance to. On view through Jan. 22.

The David Ireland House: 500 Capp St. has been a famous address among artists and others in the know since 1975, when David Ireland began inhabiting it not only as a residence but also as a live-in work of art. Closed since his death in 2009, the house was painstakingly stabilized and conserved. That required substantial expense, both of professional expertise and of cash, generously provided by a dedicated philanthropist, Carlie Wilmans. The result is wondrous, granting us a physical experience of the artist’s mystic and fertile mind. Every intellectually curious Bay

Area resident should know it well; every visitor should see it at least once.

“Cecilia Edefalk: Matrix 261”: The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive’s sleeper exhibition of the little-known — in the U.S., at least — Edefalk touched me deeply. Deceptively modest works, ostensibly based on nature and ancient history, dealt with the grandest and the smallest human themes — our place in the universe and the value of a single emotional life.

“The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe”: Substantially more than half the world is Asian, and most Asian cultures — including Jain, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu traditions — revere the Ramayana, the ancient tale of a war between good and evil. For those in the Bay Area raised in such traditions, as well as for those of us who may know little more than the story outline, the Asian Art Museum’s absorbing exhibition gives a sense of the myriad ways in which the hero Rama, his friends and his nemesis have been portrayed pan-culturally. In the telling, the museum shares rare works imbued with intensity, devotion and not a little humor. On view through Jan. 15.

“Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia”: The Legion of Honor’s presentation of the Musée d’Orsay’s take on Bonnard (1867-1947) was a far more nuanced depiction of the artist than the cardboard cut-out image we have had. Much of his work was absorbed with landscape, as suggested by the title. But he clearly was not one who “wished to paint only happy things,” as his art historian nephew once claimed. In his work as a painter of interiors, he showed a technical fascination with pictorial games of near-abstraction and a psychological



J.W. White / Phocasso

Stephanie Syjuco took over the Catharine Clark Gallery with her “Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)” show, including this mixed-media installation.



Catharine Clark Gallery

Syjuco’s 2016 photograph “Cargo Cults: Head Bundle.”

intensity not widely perceived heretofore.

“Tim Hawkinson: Garden Variety”: Only Tim Hawkinson, it seems, of all the artists of all the cultures of all time, has thought to assemble his fingernail parings into a credible model of a tiny bird skeleton, or to employ casts of his lips to depict the craters of a moon. He is, I decided upon the evidence of a comprehensive survey of recent work at Hosfelt Gallery, a navel-gazer

of the first order. There is a respectable word for that activity, I have since discovered. Omphaloskepsis: “contemplation of one’s navel as an aid to meditation,” according to Webster. Hawkinson’s musings can expand the body into worlds or collapse the universe into a human footprint.

“Tom Sachs: Space Program: Europa”: Throughout the fall, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts has housed relics of a fantasy journey to the real moon Europa, satellite of the planet Jupiter. It is but one project of the witty and wildly inventive Tom Sachs, part of a series of “Space Program” exhibitions he has shown across the country. His space vehicles are repurposed modern American discards, or built from scratch of plywood and stuff off the shelf of the local hardware warehouse. The moon colony to which he brings us reveals a story about community and the individual. On view through Jan. 15.

“Laura Owens: Ten Paintings”: Notwithstanding my pique over the way the audience is treated at some contemporary exhibition venues, I

was completely won over by the ambition and inventiveness of the expansive Laura Owens installation at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. It was like diving into a picture and floating among its layers.

“Stephanie Syjuco: Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)”: When Stephanie Syjuco showed at the Catharine Clark Gallery, she pretty much took over. Her (faux) carpets were on the floor, her (rigged) photographs on the wall, her (two-dimensional) sculpture in the middle of the main room on a large platform. The media gallery in back? Yes, that became hers, too, to screen a new video work. The commandeered space referenced the takeover of colonial cultures by modern commercialism, American- and Western European-style. Sardonicly funny, the exhibition prompted guilt and giggles in equal measure.

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