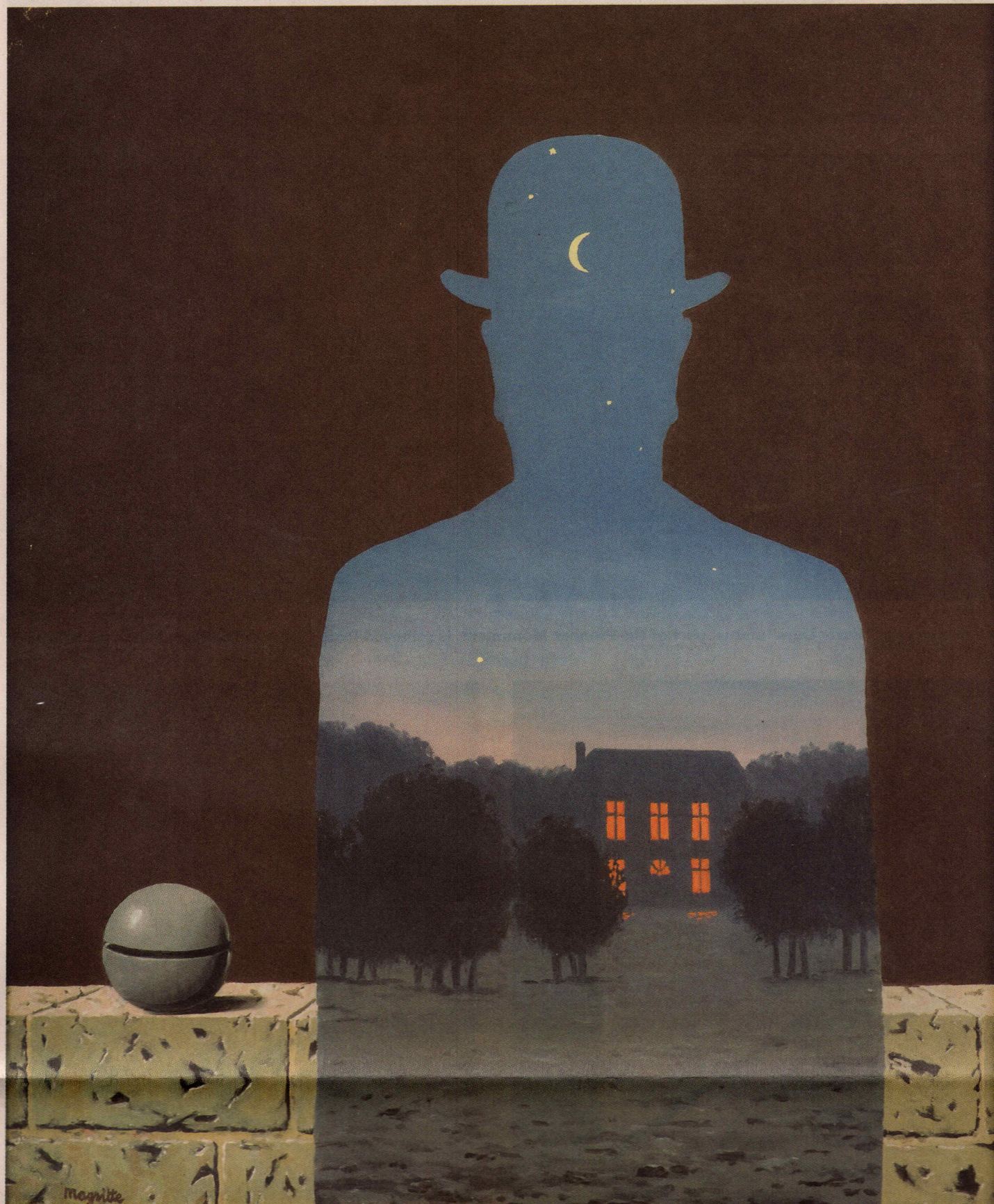




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Big changes in art world

By Charles Desmarais

Staff shuffles and leadership scrambles roiled Bay Area art museums and nonprofits this year, and the region has yet to measure the effect of so many personnel changes.

Thomas P. Campbell et al.: San Francisco traded with New York for top leaders at the largest museums in each city, as Thomas P. Campbell, the former Metropolitan Museum of Art director, was appointed to lead the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. He replaced Max Hollein, who left the San Francisco post in August to take on the directorship of the Met.

If that was the front-page news, though it was far from the only shift. Important roles unfilled at this time include director of the Museum

of the African Diaspora (which Linda Harrison is leaving for the directorship of the Newark Museum), curator and associate curator of education at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (both Dominic Willsdon and Frank Smigiel moved on) and executive director at Southern Exposure (Patricia Maloney resigned in October). The Mexican Museum announced a long-anticipated new director in December, only to retract that categorical statement, saying negotiations

Art continues on E2



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Thomas J. Campbell will lead the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Top: "The Happy Donor" by René Magritte.

Datebook Year in Review

The Chronicle's Datebook team lays out some of 2018's biggest moments in the Bay Area arts and entertainment scene. For the full package, go to datebook.sfchronicle.com.

☑ Sunday: Theater, books

☑ Monday: Classical music

☑ Tuesday: Dance

☑ Wednesday: Pop culture

☑ Thursday: Pop music/jazz

☑ Friday: Movies and television

☑ Saturday: Visual art

Highlights of the visual arts year

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with a favored candidate are proceeding.

Other institutions seem to be cutting back. San Francisco Art Institute has not replaced one key curatorial leader, then laid off the second in command. And the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts has said it will not replace its director of visual arts, Lucía Sanromán, who is working part time from her home in Mexico City. (Meanwhile, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who played a central program role, announced his departure in November.)

Amid all that change, there were extraordinary visual art offerings throughout the year. Here are a few that have stayed with me long after they closed:

“Romantic Songs of the Patriarchy”: A performance orchestrated by the incomparable Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, “Romantic Songs of the Patriarchy” packed an emotional punch in November at the Women’s Building under the auspices of the new non-profit C Project. Thirty singers at stations throughout the venue, all women strumming guitars, simultaneously delivered heartfelt renditions of pop songs everyone knows but hardly hears. Lines like “He hit me and it felt like a kiss,” “I’ll be watching you,” “You better run for your life if you can, little girl!” and “Under my thumb” blended in a symphony of misogyny.

Exhibitions: Group exhibitions at major venues across the Bay Area missed their mark all year, bloated with political self-satisfaction. Then, a smallish fall show at the San Francisco Arts Commission showed how thoughtful consideration of a crucial matter like global warming need not scold. “10,000 Fahrenheit” was an elegiac visual poem that spoke of the frail relationship between the sun, the Earth and the human race.

Solo exhibitions by contemporary artists always merit close attention, for the simple reason that they are our opportunity for one-on-one conversations at an intimate level. The most outstanding San Francisco debut of the year was Matthew Angelo Harrison’s spring show at Jessica Silverman Gallery. Clear resin blocks were embedded with shamanistic objects of African origin, then pierced and machined with high-tech precision. The gods those sculptures serve are a breed we hadn’t known before.

In October, Lava Thomas showed drawings at Rena Bransten Gallery that paid tribute to the heroic women arrested during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956. They were much more than mere likenesses, examples of artistic technique itself as a tool of political argument.

The exhibition of Wayne Thiebaud’s extraordinary first decade of painting, at UC Davis’ Manetti Shrem Museum of Art last winter, was a wonder. It felt as fresh as it must have appeared in the 1960s, when it made the artist, now 98 and still making inventive work, an instant star.

I surprise myself with the realization that “René Ma-



Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

The controversial “Early Days” statue, part of the Pioneer Monument, is removed from Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco.



Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle



Phillip Maisel / Rena Bransten Gallery

Odessa Chen, left, performs “He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)” at a Women’s Building show. Above: Lava Thomas made portraits of women of the Montgomery bus boycott.

gritte: The Fifth Season” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this summer was the best deep dive into art history at a major museum, given two excellent offerings (“Truth and Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelites and the Old Masters” and “Casanova: The Seduction of Europe”) at the Legion of Honor this year. But it was concise and surprising, offering something new to those of us who thought Magritte had worn out his claim to our attention.

At the de Young Museum, the unveiling last year of a strong collection of works by African American artists sent

a signal of change that is nicely borne out this year by a fine re-installation of the museum’s permanent collection, “Specters of Disruption,” which runs through April 30.

The de Young is noted for its attention to costume as art — a field ignored by many museums for the not-so-good reason that textiles are difficult and expensive to preserve and exhibit. Two terrific exhibitions taught us a great deal about the societal implications of the way we dress. “Contemporary Muslim Fashions,” on view through Jan. 6, amounts to nothing less than “a palpable tectonic tremor in the

cultural landscape,” giving many of us a new appreciation for a quarter million Bay Area neighbors. The summer exhibition “Weapons of Mass Seduction” introduced viewers to Japanese “propaganda kimonos” that helped build support — by use of startling textile design — for what became World War II.

“Early Days”: If a prize were awarded for cluelessness, however, this year it would surely belong to the San Francisco Arts Commission. That august body expended substantial energy working for the removal of a work of public sculpture.

The commission says it “champions the arts as essential to daily life by investing in a vibrant arts community, enlivening the urban environment and shaping innovative cultural policy.” But it lobbied and spent about \$200,000 to sweep under the rug, rather than spotlight and interpret, the California-bred racism embedded in a 19th century work called “Early Days.”

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