



Keith Petersen / Anthony Meier Fine Arts

"What Will Be Remembered in the Face of All That Is Forgotten" is the centerpiece of Tavares Strachan's new exhibition.

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Bold visions bring past into a new light

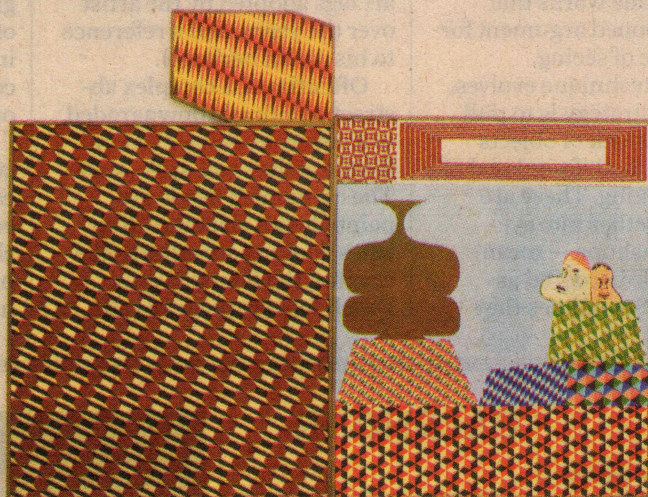
Tavares Strachan, Barry McGee exhibitions shouldn't be missed

Missing any of the many worthy exhibitions in the galleries this month is sure to feed that end-of-year anxiety we all feel. But two shows closing soon are so rewarding, no one will regret taking time from a busy holiday schedule to see them.

Craft in art gets a bad rap these days, especially when careful attention to technique is combined with materials we commonly use in decorative or utilitarian ways. Tavares Strachan (at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, closing Friday, Dec. 11) calls upon his impressive skills as a glassmaker to fabricate uncannily delicate objects that nevertheless bear a heavy conceptual weight.

The centerpiece of this, his gallery debut in San Francisco, is a pulsing blue neon, full-scale glass facsimile of the human circulatory sys-

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Ratio 3

Maverick San Francisco artist Barry McGee often combines small painted panels into eye-popping mashups.

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tem. The figure, raised above a pedestal at the end of a darkened hall, its arms extended in a gesture of welcome and protection, appears to pause mid-ascension. A whining chorus of transformer cooling fans is the only sound, the flickering of heart and veins the only light.

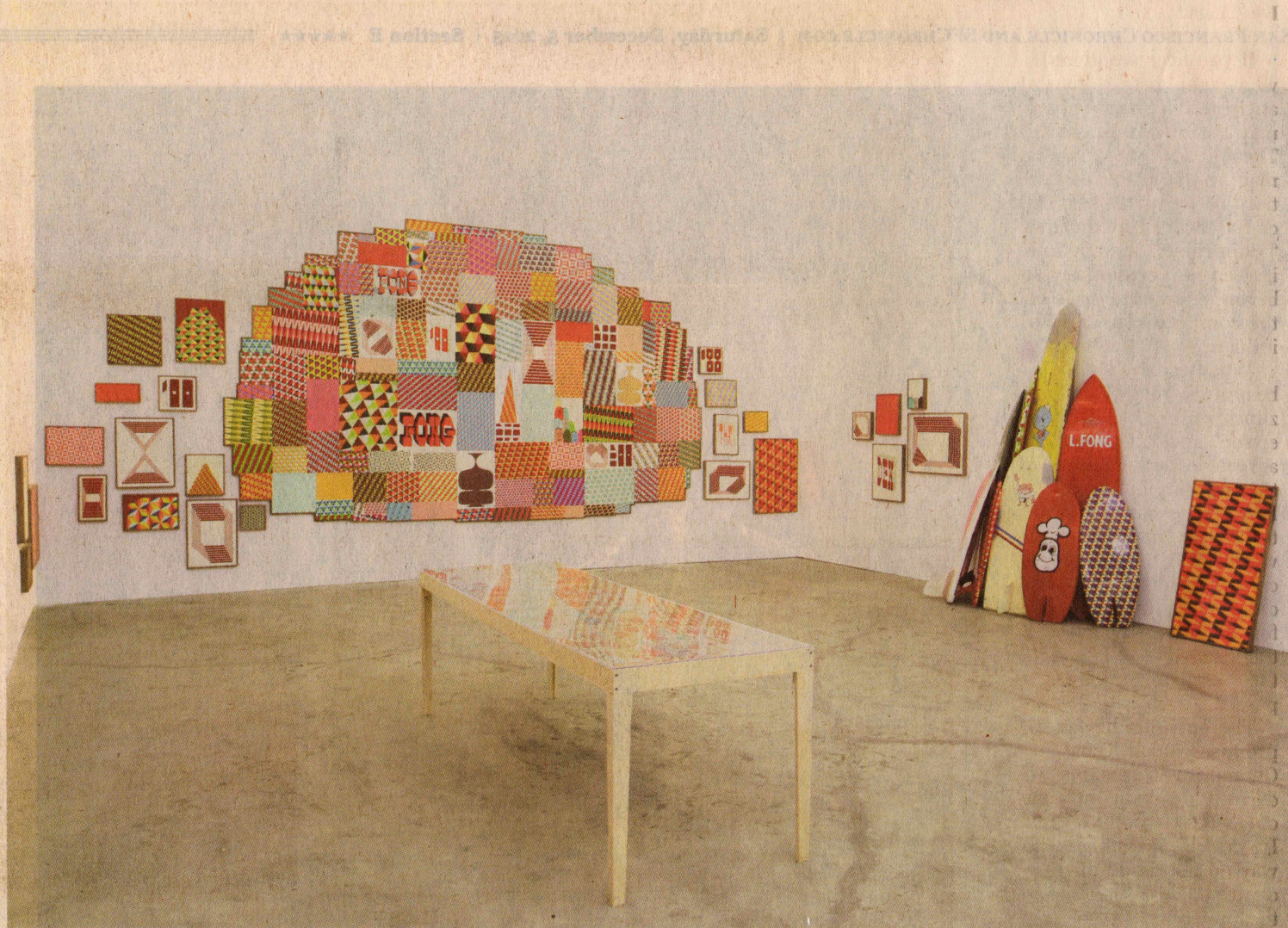
Did I say welcome? Protection? Perhaps, but the body language also brings to mind a crucifixion. The cold blue light does not suggest refuge.

The soft organs like the vascular system are the least durable of what is left of us after death. Strachan's title for the work, "What Will Be Remembered in the Face of All That Is Forgotten," at first makes no sense. The show is introduced, however, by a large collage portrait called "Rosalind," and other titles reference "Rosalind Franklin." The exhibition is a tribute, then, to Franklin, a British scientist — a woman — who died young at 37, and whose contributions to the discovery of DNA and other major scientific breakthroughs are said to have gone largely ignored, if not obliterated, by those who showered prizes on her peers.

Other works in the show reinforce the ideas of invisibility and disrupted memory. The whole enterprise is called "Seeing Is Forgetting the Thing That You Saw," surely a reference to Lawrence Weschler's great biography of the conceptual and perceptual artist Robert Irwin, "Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees." Small sculptures in wood-framed vitrines — the kind once seen in science museums — are half substantial, half ethereal: The upper part of a found object is bonded to a glass reproduction, immersed in mineral oil and only faintly discernible, of its lower part. Scientific implements, a pair of nurse shoes, a cricket ball and bat: objects evoking a life we can never really know.

The environment of Anthony Meier's extraordinary 1915 medieval-revival gallery/home further imbues a hazy sense of time past and Englishness. Two 6-by-6-foot canvases complete the exhibition. Pages of an encyclopedia, digitally transferred to their surfaces, are littered with white redactions, emptying the evidentiary record of content, and continuing the theme of historical erasure.

Exalting the discarded: No less skillfully crafted, and just as concerned with history, new works by Barry McGee convey a very different mood. Where Strachan deals in polemical melancholy (hardly a bad thing), McGee exalts the discarded and disused (a very good thing in his hands).



Ratio 3

The "China Boo" exhibition at Ratio 3 is Barry McGee's first hometown gallery show since 2008. It finds the maverick corralling his volatile artistic temperament into domestic-scale works while still using unconventional painting surfaces like surfboards.

Tavares Strachan: Seeing Is Forgetting the Thing That You Saw: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. Through Friday, Dec. 11. Anthony Meier Fine Arts, 1969 California St., S.F. (415) 351-1400. www.anthonymeierfinearts.com.

Barry McGee: China Boo: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 19. Ratio 3, 2831-A Mission St., S.F. (415) 821-3371. www.ratio3.org.

This is the hometown master's first Bay Area exhibition in three years and his first San Francisco gallery show since 2008. Depending on whom you talk to, a presentation like this in a commercial gallery, Ratio 3, either marks a step toward maturity or a bow to the art market. It may be a little of both. I find it a welcome thing to watch this ordinarily unbridled maverick — a guy who has dragged overturned trucks into past shows — corralling his volatile artistic temperament in favor of domestic-scale works that make a reasoned argument for the pleasure of seeing.

McGee's technique evolves, but a basic strategy is to pull from a vast stock of objects and images, both found and of his own making. These are brought together into eye-popping mashups — meaning, slack-bordered assemblages. Sometimes they

look like paintings, because they are made up of paintings (smaller painted panels, butted together); sometimes they are sculptural. Sometimes they combine both two- and three-dimensional elements.

Composition in a McGee piece, like so much else in his working method, is a slippery idea. I think of the way he puts together a 2-D work as more like composing music than painting. Geometric abstraction is everywhere in this

exhibition, but generally it shows up as separate, clashing movements of far more complex arrangements. These might include numbers and notations — references entirely obscure, or meaningful only to the initiated:

"DFW" (down for whatever). "THR" (the harsh reality). "FONG" (one of several street art tags adopted by the artist over the years, and a reference to his Asian heritage).

Oftentimes, a complex abstract painting is downgraded to a new role, as background for the artist's sad-sack faces. The cartoonish heads are painted with elaborate flourishes, looking something like Fraktur, the Pennsylvania Dutch folk art penmanship.

Unconventional painting surfaces include old surfboards or, famously, pint-size liquor bottles found in street gutters. Paintings are balanced on cinder blocks, on an old car tire.

I would have liked to write a whole review without reference to McGee's past as a graffiti writer and street artist, and as a hero to skaters and surfers. Not because that identity isn't a big part of the work (and of the artist's life: I had to

be spirited through a back door to avoid a rock-star-worthy crush of fans at the show's opening reception), but because too few analyses go much beyond those facts.

McGee goes far beyond: He is

one of the best abstract artists of the moment. He is one of very few painters who can grant us the sensual pleasure of looking, without the posturing cynicism that lies at the cold heart of much abstract art of our day.

Ironically, though the abstract elements of his work can be laboriously hand-painted, they are themselves reclaimed discards of a sort. I haven't visited his studio, but I have in my mind's eye stacks

of lively geometric panels: a library of painted phrases to be added intuitively to larger works as needed. They are not treated as precious objects, as we might assume a work of art would be; they are new paintings but worn images from another era, visual detritus found down the dead-end alley of formalism, and gleefully repurposed for a new audience.

But the street is not out of McGee's blood yet, if it ever will be. Alongside the Mission Street gallery presenting McGee's work is another commercial space, recently vacated. A carefully painted sign above the door reads, "L. QUAN Check Cashing and Healing Arts Centre." Through the locked security gate, an apparently haphazard display of wall art and objects — something akin to an unkempt thrift store — can be viewed. The only actual entrance, it turns out, is through a tiny doorway, no more than 4 feet high, cut through the wall from McGee's show. Here, the artist has invited 120 artists to present a floor-to-ceiling cacophony of some 200 to 300 works (no one seems to have counted) of wildly varying styles and content.

The maverick's spirit has found a place to roam free.

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