

Under-the-radar galleries worth a trip

By Charles Desmarais

Anyone might feel a twinge of guilt at not regularly visiting all the great venues for visual art in the Bay Area. When it's your job to keep up with the best in San Francisco art, however, you live each day under a cloud of regret. My only defense is that the offerings are too rich to be devoured whole.

I keep a list that currently includes what I judge to be 122 of the most reliable exhibition spaces — mostly museums and commercial galleries. A quick scan of any search engine will prove that there are many more such efforts in the region.

If I can't review them all, however, I can highlight the most promising. Here are three under-the-radar spaces that deserve attention for the quality of their offerings and for the priority they place on art and ideas over commerce. They might seem a bit intimidating, at first: All require you to ring a bell for entry; all maintain limited public hours. But they will happily open their doors at off times by appointment and, once inside, you're likely to feel more like the guest of a knowledgeable owner or staffer than a potential customer.

Ephemeral landscapes: Cult / Aimee Friberg Exhibitions relocated some months ago from its small, out-of-the-way space in the Mission to what seems an even smaller, less visible gallery two blocks from Alamo Square. What the gallery lacks in scale, however, it more than makes up in ambience and ambition.

The single, lovely room is reached down a long covered alley and across a paved courtyard. The current show, extended only through Saturday, May 19, consists of luminous landscapes that seem about to dissolve into multicolored wisps of atmosphere. Artist Terri Loewenthal's exhibition is titled "Psychscapes."

The pictures flip and fold into themselves, shimmer and fade. They are obviously photographic, looking somewhat like multiple exposures. An attendant assured me that they are what the camera saw, and that once captured, the images have not been manipulated.

That leaves prisms, mirrors or some other optical method. It hardly matters. Call them hallucinations, visions, metaphors — they are records of visits to places previously inaccessible.

In the shadow of SFMOMA: Another gallery that recently moved to new digs is Hackett Mill, which generally deals in classic post-World War II art. In November, the gallery left its home of seven years on Post Street for an architecturally significant building of 1970, in an alleyway behind the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Ring the bell and someone comes down an elevator from the fourth floor to let you in.

The gallery is a crowded space, housing offices and

library, as well as well-lighted walls. The feel of the place is homey in the way we imagine a successful scholar's quarters to be. The current exhibition, "David Park and Milton Avery," runs through May 31. It is a quietly intelligent pairing of two artists rarely shown together, but who shared an interest in figuration, devotion to family, and the grudging respect, at the time they were working, of an art world more attuned to abstraction and formal issues.

Small pictures by Park show particularly well in this setting, barely containing a stoppered energy that Avery's works never suggest. Park's "Red Man in Striped Shirt" (1959) is a case in point, with its calmly confident protagonist emerging from a hellish background, a stolen bit of magma grasped in his massive fist.

Prophets in their own neighborhood: Vanessa Blaikie and Joey Piziali have been making a mark with their

Romer Young Gallery in Dogpatch for, depending on how you count, as many as 13 years. Yet I am not the only person who knew something about their program and their presence at art fairs far out of town, without ever having set foot in their San Francisco brick-and-mortar space. That, despite proximity to the much larger, much younger Minnesota Street Project.

The gallery started as an ad hoc thing with little thought of sales, a space for friends and other artists to share ideas. By 2010, however, with the rent rising and new opportunities becoming apparent, what had been Ping Pong Gallery became Romer Young, christened with the maiden names of the couple's mothers.

They developed a national and international roster of artists, determined to give them the representation they required. The San Francisco models that come to mind are places like Anthony Meier Fine Arts and Jessica Silverman Gallery, small in square footage but well networked abroad.

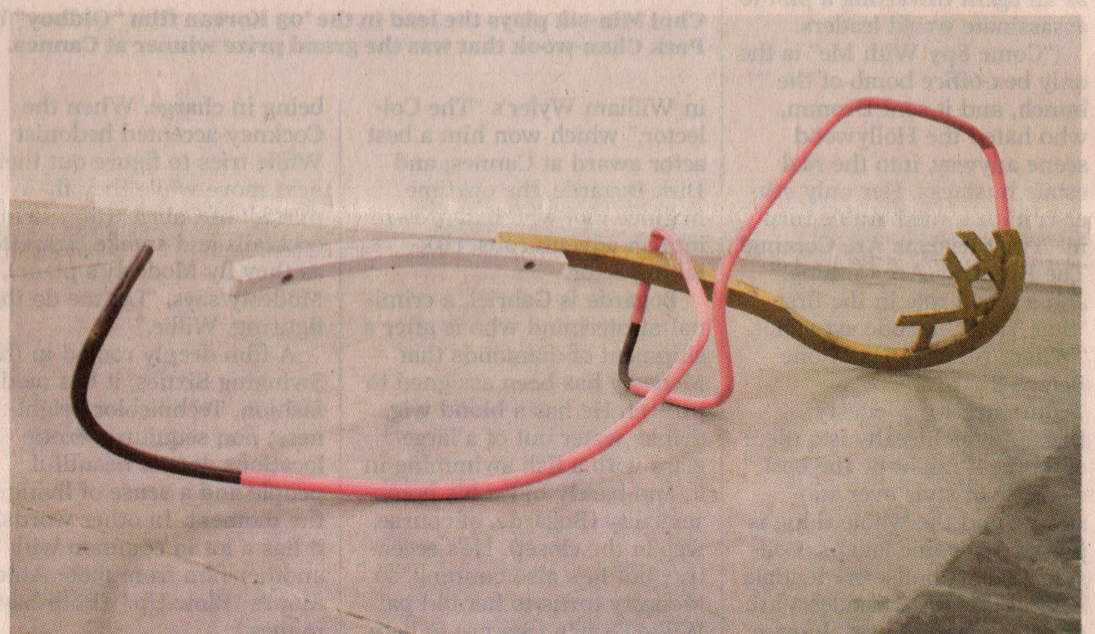
The current show of quirky sculpture by Kirk Stoller, "The Color Ran From His Face," is on view through June 9. Stoller makes the kind of sculpture often called "drawings in space," with reference to certain works of, say, Alexander Calder, Gego or David Smith. Stoller, though, brings humor and a kind of salvation to the meanest of found materials.

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Hackett Mill

"Red Man in Striped Shirt" is among the works by David Park at Hackett Mill gallery.



Romer Young Gallery

Romer Young Gallery showcases works by Kirk Stoller, including this untitled sculpture.



Cult / Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

Terri Loewenthal's "Psychscape 18 (Banner Ridge, CA)" is at Cult / Aimee Friberg gallery.