

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFCHRONICLE.COM | July 2-8, 2017

Datebook

Local color

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50 years of SECA
artist awards

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COVER STORY



SFMOMA thinks globally while honoring local art

SECA Art Awards marks 50 years of pulling emerging local artists into the limelight

By Charles Desmarais

The SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) Art Award, an occasional project of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to recognize Bay Area artists, celebrates its 50th anniversary beginning July 15. That is the date its associated, closely watched exhibition opens to the public. The show runs through Sept. 17.

This year, there are five recipients, chosen from among the most exciting artists working in the region at the moment. The winners are Liam Everett, Alicia McCarthy, Sean McFarland, K.R.M. Mooney and Lindsey White. The finalists also included Amy Balkin, Nate Boyce, Will Brown (a three-person collective, of which Lindsey White is a part), Ajit Chauhan, Ala Ebtekar, Constance Hockaday, Cybele Lyle, Mads Lynnerup, Ben Peterson, Richard T. Walker and May Wilson.

The winners this year each will have a discrete gallery in the museum for a one-person show. As we wait to see what they and exhibition curators Jenny Gheith and Erin O'Toole have concocted, it is a good time to consider the award and its meaning for art and audiences today.

All museums that deal in any way with the efforts of living artists must determine the scope of their programs. The world is vast, and the work philosophies and methods of artists wildly varied. For any museum to even skim the surface of all contemporary art would be logistically and financially impossible.

Some institutions — generally the smaller ones — serve their local audience and save money by focusing on artists close at hand. But even the most ambitious museums usually demonstrate some interest in artists who work in their communities.

It is never enough. Artists passed over will demand



Photos by Nicole Boliaux / The Chronicle

2017 SECA Art Award winner Alicia McCarthy uses spray paint, above, for her piece at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, left.

2017 SECA Art Award Exhibition: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. July 15-Sept. 17. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

their turn; museum attendees and supporters will have their own favorites.

And yet, in the midst of such pressure for inclusion, everyone wants high standards. Curators, who will make the choices, have their integrity to maintain — not to mention their career visibility in the eyes of colleagues in their field. The community wants to know it is getting the best the museum can offer. And artists, most of all, know that the most important external measure of their work is the setting in which it is shown, the company of artists among whom they are seen.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was

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once a dependable outlet for the advanced art of our region and an enthusiastic fan of artists here. It also struggled with a reputation as provincial.

The museum today is far richer and larger, grown from a robust exhibition center in the corridors and upper rooms of the old War Memorial building into the largest modern art museum in the U.S. Its program has grown apace with its facility, expanding its international portfolio and profile.

Looking back over the past 50 years of SECA Awards, one finds, of course, evidence of fads and fashions in art, but also a surprising number of artists who have played a vital role in the Bay Area for decades.

(There is also — and this is no surprise — a sizable number of people who were missed. The absence of names like Robert Bechtle, Lynn Herschman, Tom Marioni and Paul Kos from past lists of winners — or, say, Guggenheim fellows Chris Solars and Stephanie Syjuco in recent years — may be traceable to SECA's aim to identify "emerging" artists.)

I think it's fair to say that many who built and maintain careers here were aided by the award — see, for example, the comments of six awardees in this issue of Datebook. If nothing else, it seems to help an artist win teaching positions and continued exposure in regional galleries.

At the same time, relatively few seem to have built a solid market for their work outside the Bay Area. Both Barry McGee and Kota Ezawa point out that their New York success preceded their selection for the award.

The indefatigable collector and great booster of Northern California art Rene di Rosa said he saw value in supporting "the creative underdogs" of the region. I love the sentiment, but I don't think artists here need charity as much as they do professional career support beyond our temperate bubble.

A SECA Award exhibition at SFMOMA today places an artist's work in what is, by definition, an international context. Is there more that could be done? The museum's engagement with museums, collectors and artists worldwide places it at a valuable nexus. The artworld power that derives from its curatorial expertise, collection resources and financial health is significant.

If there is to be a next step for the SECA Award, it will depend upon SFMOMA's ability — aided by all of us who care deeply about our artists and the cultural health of our community — not only to celebrate here but project abroad our pride in the richness that surrounds us.

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Gay Outlaw, "Nest" (1999); pencils, glue.



Rigo 23, "Geronimo" (1997).

Courtesy Rigo 23



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Desirée Holman, "At the Kitchen Table With Football" (2007); colored pencil on paper.