

What is the SECA Art Award?

By Charles Desmarais

"No one will tell you this," the venerable art dealer Rena Bransten wrote me a few weeks ago, "but SECA was started to get the husbands of the women on the Women's Board more interested in the arts. I can't remember when they decided that women could join SECA too!"

Not everyone familiar with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will know the history of its Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, but all Bay Area art followers are aware of the group's SECA Art Award and its accompanying exhibition. Now in its 50th year, the award is by far the most prestigious regionally based program to recognize living artists.

Museum officials confirm that SECA, the group, was founded by 75 men in 1961 to "seek out promising young artists, jury an exhibition and encourage members of the community to collect the work of emerging artists." By 1966, the year before the award was established, it began to admit women.

I record these details not to question a decades-old audience development strategy but to highlight the substantial change that has surrounded the group and the award over their lifetimes. What started as a club to encourage collecting through trips to New York and sales exhibitions in the museum galleries morphed into a contemporary art study group, and from there to the artist-centered award program of today.

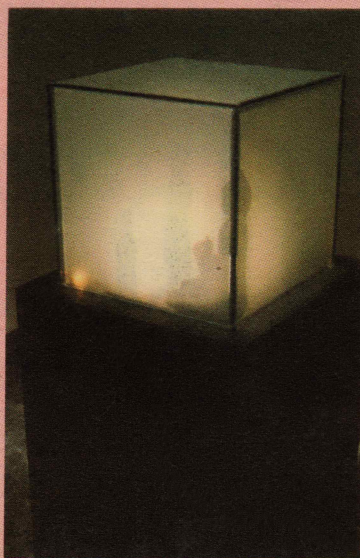
For many years the society was a largely autonomous group, supportive of SFMOMA goals but run by its members. Group tours of artist studios have always been a part of the awards process (there were 16 finalists this year), with the selection of the final winner made from among the artists that were visited. Decisions on which artists to visit and, crucially, who would receive the award were originally made by SECA members and committees.

Beginning in the 1980s, the role of SFMOMA curators in the process began an uneasy shift from observers, to advisers, to decision makers. By 1994, according to a museum history of the award, the "SFMOMA leadership decided that in order to maintain coherence with the museum's broader exhibitions programming and bolster the award's profile within the artist community, the final selection of the awardees should be in the hands of the curators."



© Rigo 23 1998

Rigo 98 (now Rigo 23), detail of "Study for Looking at 1998 San Francisco From the Top of 1925," felt-tip pen, acrylic, tape, paper and electrostatic prints.



Courtesy Jim Campbell

Jim Campbell, "Untitled (for Heisenberg)" (1994-95).

The award was at first an annual affair, then a biennial one until 2012. The 2017 exhibition marks its return after a five-year hiatus occasioned by SFMOMA's massive construction project, concluded early last year.

For a long time the primary award was for painting and sculpture, with "special awards" segregating exhibitions of photography, film, new media and design. That practice ended in 2001; this year, for the first time, a photography specialist, Erin O'Toole, is a co-curator (with Jenny Gheith).

It has recognized a single artist in some years and as many as five in others (more in the special categories, which were sometimes sizable group shows). The SECA Art Award has been conferred upon a total of 77 artists; include special award exhibitions and that number grows to nearly 200.

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