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Fall season brings rich gallery offerings

By Charles Desmarais

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Judy Chicago's "Study for Untitled Test Plate" (1974-75) is at Silverman Gallery.

One sure sign the Bay Area art gallery scene has reached a new stage in its maturation: The sheer impossibility of giving in-depth consideration to every good gallery exhibition, as the fall season unfurls. Here, then, is the first of two columns full of recently opened shows that readers won't want to miss. Check back next week for more.

Tenderloin West: Three highly recommended exhibitions, all within a 10-minute walk, are proof there's more than just a burgeoning bar scene in this formerly ignored corner of San Francisco.

Start with "Judy Chicago's Pussies," a micro-retrospective, on view through Oct. 28, of the outsize career of feminism's best-known artist. **Jessica Silverman Gallery** (488 Ellis St. <http://jessicasilvermangallery.com>) has assembled choice rarities, including drawings and ceramic test plates for Chicago's renowned "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), a tribute to women's achievements through history.

One could not study 20th century art history without reference to that vast work of installation art, which today permanently occupies what amounts to a sub-museum within New York's Brooklyn Museum. (The piece, incidentally, was unveiled to the world at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979.) Two

Jessica Silverman Gallery
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particularly classic preparatory drawings – intense in color, labial mandalas in form – are standouts.

Chicago (whom I have known for years and count as a personal friend) began to develop what she calls “central core” imagery even before “The Dinner Party,” as engaging sketches like “Through the Flower Darkly” (1973) demonstrate. And a large minimalist painting, heretical in its proudly girlish pastel colors (“Morning Fan” from 1971), shows the depth of her commitment to rewriting the gendered rules of art.

A second room of more literal (i.e., illustrational) drawings of cats lacks the intellectual heft that brought Chicago her hard-earned fame, but this is not an artist who ever waited for critics to approve her next move.

Modernism (724 Ellis St. www.modernisminc.com) has on view a museum-level selection of works by **Edvard Munch** (1863-1944), the Norwegian artist currently featured in a blockbuster exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. “Breathe, Feel, Suffer and Love: Prints & Drawings 1894-1930” has media excluded from the big museum show but that the artist considered central to his concerns. The Modernism show runs through Oct. 7, two days before SFMOMA closes its Munch treatment.

The two shows provide an opportunity to compare Munch paintings and prints, often of the same subjects. Just as he reworked themes in his paintings over many years, he took up those themes on paper, as well. Then he often came up with alternate interpretations in those media.

Two printed versions of “Vampire II” (1895-1902) are evidence of the radically different conceptions Munch could bring to an identical subject. Each combine woodcut and lithography but with different colors – and divergent emotional effect.

“The Kiss IV” (1902) takes up a classic Munch theme. The print on view at Modernism is more effective even than the painting at the museum in emphasizing the characters’ melded figures and shared yearning.

The newest gallery in the neighborhood, **R/SF Projects** (1050 Larkin St. <http://rsfprojects.com>), is youthful in its offering, as well. **Marcela Pardo Ariza**, born in Bogota, Colombia, in 1991, brings humor and cinematic color to her work and to the space that contains it in her exhibition “Slow Clap.”

The walls are painted in clashing tones. Visual puns abound. A vertical mural depicting a ladder is affixed to the risers of a stair: Which is the way up? A dramatic striped yellow crosswalk divides the gallery: Slow down, it warns; watch for the unsuspecting.

Bright-hued photographs in matching frames on matching walls celebrate the absurd. In “Sunny Side Up,” a cracked egg competes for attention with the sun on a tropical horizon. “I’m Too Sad to Tell You (after Bas Jan Ader, in different times)” references a famous conceptual work and features a man in pigtailed, wrapped into a child’s posture of cranky self-absorption.

In a mezzanine gallery, “Congregation” invites visitors to sit on benches, which are laid out in rows. We face a wall of life-size images of the backs of people’s heads. We join the silent meeting, blending into the mosaic of diversity, taking part in a ceremony of no discernible value or intention. The exhibition runs through Oct. 8.

Old guard: The galleries that remain at 49 Geary St., traditionally the prestige art commerce address in San Francisco, are acting like the center of gravity has not been migrating south to SoMa and Dogpatch in recent years. **Haines Gallery** (<http://hainesgallery.com>) presents a lively survey of recent abstract paintings by **Mike Henderson**, a Bay Area favorite since the 1970s, while **Robert Koch Gallery** (www.kochgallery.com) introduces **Adam Katseff’s** large-scale, duskily romantic landscapes.

At **Fraenkel Gallery** (<https://fraenkelgallery.com>), three wall drawings by the late **Sol LeWitt** (1928-2007) look as fresh and challenging as they did in the 1990s, when these works were conceived, or in the

decades before, as he developed his signature conceptual approach. These days, most of us see LeWitt work adapted to the large galleries of museums. The Fraenkel presentation reminds us of their power to expand more intimate settings, as if adding to a room not only an agreeable complexity but also actual space.

The LeWitt works are installed along with photo works by **Liz Deschenes**, whose elegant camera-less prints in chunky white frames embody a stylish emptiness, very of the moment.

All three 49 Geary shows are on view through Oct. 28.

Season debut: Not far away, at 10 Hawthorne St., **Berggruen Gallery** (www.berggruen.com) begins its first fall in new digs with two shows that also run through Oct. 28. The main floor is occupied by boldly graphic paintings by **David Bates**, a gallery stalwart. Upstairs, new work by **Mark Fox** comprises Berggruen's first exhibition with the artist.

I have known Fox and watched the development of his art for more than 20 years, beginning in the days after he received a master's degree from Stanford for his work as a painter. At the time, he had made a sharp turn away from the canvas. He was crafting puppet characters, employing them in surreal narratives on elaborate sets.

Later, he turned to a hybrid form of drawing, text and sculpture that caught the eye of, among others, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. Last year, Stanford's Anderson Collection presented some of those works, which sometimes included entire Catholic doctrinal texts painstakingly cut into thousands of mounted words and phrases.

Knowing that background of obsessive attention to the word-as-object is useful in penetrating the dense works in the current show. Dense, in both a metaphorical sense and a literal one. All the objects exhibited, some of them 9 inches thick and nearly 7 feet across, are built up, layer by layer, of drawings and scrawled words on paper, glued one atop the next.

Some of the drawings might be hand-corrugated, then glued between two flat drawings to make a diaristic cardboard, laden with images, autobiography and ideas. As Fox draws on the surface, cuts into it, tears away or glues bits, the work is weighted by its a significance available in its entirety only to him.

One of the largest pieces in the show is "Untitled (Plow)," a heavy object warped and bound by its content, a giant blade with which to bulldoze a path through chaos to a roughly level spot.

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