

San Francisco Chronicle

In the galleries this spring: Art that seeks to define itself

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Davina Semo's "Precarious Hardware," on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery, includes "Threshold" (left), "Vibrator," "Exotica," "Muse," "Heart," "Glow" and "Homegrown." Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery

Davina Semo's "Precarious Hardware," at Jessica Silverman Gallery through May 4, is full of allusion but does not lend itself to easy narratives.

Wall works analogous to paintings are reflective panels of brightly colored plexiglass, embedded with ball bearings. There are tens, maybe hundreds of circular casings mounted in panels of various colors. As manufactured, they would be used to reduce friction. Here, they are immobilized, stripped of their function and their potential, reduced to mere decoration.

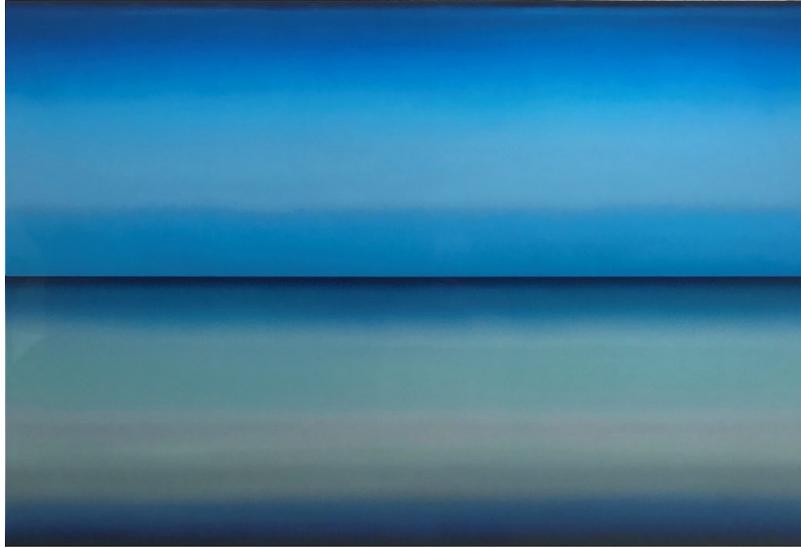
Cast bronze bells, polished to a golden luster, have holes drilled through to reveal their oxidized interiors. Their tongues of wood produce a mellow sound, lovely but tamed.

There are three bells, "Seducer," "Messenger" and "Vibrator." Hung among them are bronze casts of deflowered, uprooted silk floss trees — palos borrachos (drunken sticks): "Exotica," "Muse" and "Homegrown." Perhaps the nasty thorns on their black-patinated trunks are what punctured the brilliant gongs.

A "Threshold" of powder-coated steel chain is the size and shape of an arched door, but I can't shake my reading of it as anything but a niqab, the facial veil so feared and misunderstood. Does it protect or imprison the Muslim women who wear it?

And what of the traditions of so-called mainstream Western culture? Is a Roman arch a doorway if it is filled with forged steel?

"Davina Semo: Precarious Hardware": 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through May 4. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 415-255-9508. <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com>



"Mid Refraction" is a 2018 work by Casper Brindle, among the works in his show at Nancy Toomey Gallery. Photo: Nancy Toomey Gallery

Landscapes of infinity: They are flat as can be, with surfaces so hard and polished they suggest a world frozen in the purest ice, yet the illusion created by Casper Brindle in one group of preciously crafted paintings at Nancy Toomey Fine Art is of infinite space. Among the works in "Chromatic Flux," Brindle's first show with Toomey, it is the simplest in form that allow for the richest associations. These are all divided by a horizontal – not a line but a glow of deepening color, like the edge of the day's last light where it folds against the earth.

They are aluminum and auto paint and resin, but the impression they make is of energy, not matter. The exhibition closes March 30.

"Casper Brindle: Chromatic Flux": 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through March 30. Free. Nancy Toomey Fine Art, 1275 Minnesota St., S.F. 415-307-9038. <http://nancytoomeyfineart.com>



"Untitled #11600-6238" is a 2016 photograph by Todd Hido. Photo: Todd Hido

Out of the shadows: Todd Hido's latest photographs, at Casemore Kirkeby through April 2, continue his exploration of the great paradox of pictorial meaning: the palpable significance of what is not described.

The exhibition is called "Bright Black World," which is also the name of a new book, one of a dozen or more that survey aspects of his career. The title suggests the shadows and evening skies of his best known pictures, dark places that may hide something we can't know, but are valued for themselves, as well.

Hido is a master of the intentionally flawed photograph, made through a steamy or rain-spotted lens.

The kind of picture that says more than a clear one because it is, after all, not about an object but about a wistful, sodden moment. One bitter-cold, untitled image might be frozen blocks embedded in a slurry of old snow. Closer examination reveals the blocks to be Visqueen-covered windows in a moldy room, not quite abandoned, not yet renewed.

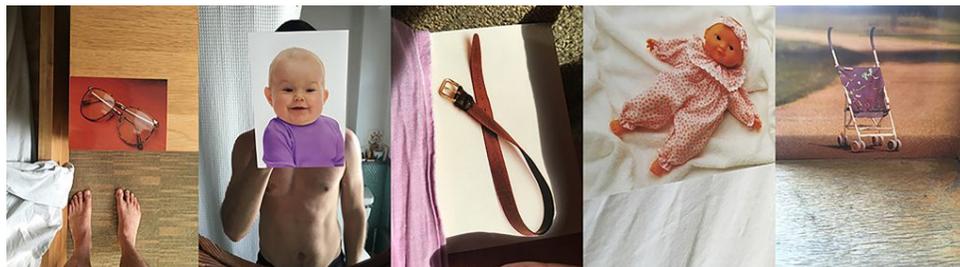
For this series, the artist turned his camera to subjects beyond the American suburbs he has helped us to know, traveling to northern Europe in winter. The region is a fitting subject for his melancholic approach, with its hard and empty landscapes.



In Todd Hido's "Untitled 11799-3893," lighted crosses in a cemetery contrast with the darkening sky. Photo: Todd Hido

One discovery, which has the look of a place at the far end of the furthest road, was a graveyard full of lighted crosses. They were certainly decorated as symbols of hope, of light amid the gloom, but in Hido's image they serve best to call attention to the blackening sky.

"Todd Hido: Bright Black World": 11 a.m.–6 p.m. Tuesday–Saturday. Through April 2. Free. Casemore Kirkeby, 1275 Minnesota St., S.F. 415-851-9808. <https://casemorekirkeby.com>



"Have you seen my language (Group 1)" is by Matt Keegan. Photo: Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Language as art: Language and its workings are an abiding interest of New York artist Matt Keegan. "Use Your Words," Keegan's fourth show at Altman Siegel, is on view through April 20.

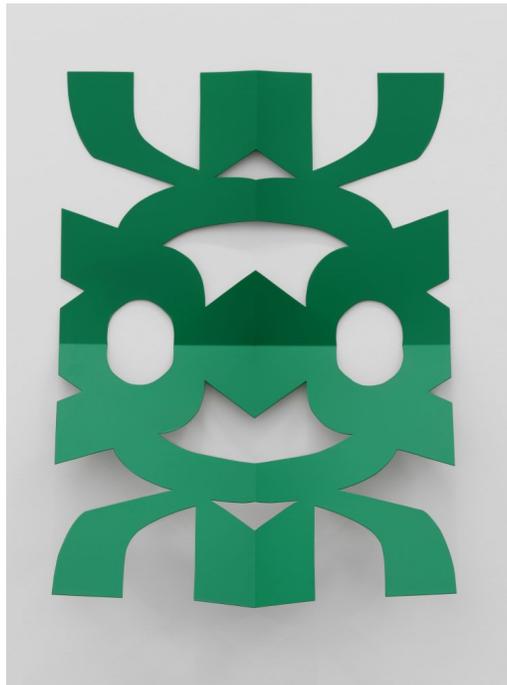
The exhibition requires patience, a demand of many Altman Siegel presentations. Five laser-cut steel sculptures are quirkily attractive, dense with powder-coat color. They are interspersed among photographic and video works presented in cheery overlap.

I prefer to look first, then read whatever a gallery has to offer. A handout at the front desk is indispensable in this case.

One 2016 series, called "Have you seen my language," consists of photographs of language-teaching flash cards placed in nondescript settings. A card picturing eyeglasses is on a bedside nightstand, where actual glasses might be found. A flashcard with a baby's chubby head, affixed to a mirror, replaces the head of the photographer seen in reflection. An image of water becomes a hazard on a sunny garden path. Fifty such images play upon the conundrum of truth and its report.

Another set of visual flashcards is the source for new video works. They were cut by the artist's mother some years ago from magazine advertisements, to use in her work as a teacher of English as a second language. Shot in a faux-commercial style, the videos slyly debunk the myths propagated by the original images.

Those sculptures, too, suggest elements of language. Based on cardboard models constructed by the artist, they propose new characters, part of a new alphabet of indeterminate meaning. In that, of course, they are like all art.



"Cutout (Signal Green)" by Matt Keegan is among his works on view at Altman Siegel. Photo: Altman Siegel, San Francisco

"Matt Keegan: Use Your Words": 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through April 20. Free. Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-576-9300. <http://altmansiegel.com>