

DATEBOOK

4 Gallery Exhibitions to Share This Holiday Season

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There's no shortage of opportunities to enjoy – and perhaps share with visitors – thoughtful art exhibitions at Bay Area museums this holiday season.

They run the gamut from art in the age of Black Power (at the de Young Museum through March 15) to the colorful, unpolished art of Burning Man (Oakland Museum through Feb. 16); from James Tissot's flowery depictions of 19th century high society in England and France (Legion of Honor through Feb. 9) to conceptually formidable contemporary works (two good shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art into February and beyond).

Don't let such bounty blind you, however, to the wealth of smart private gallery exhibitions, all without an admission charge.

Photography celebrates an anniversary

Of particular interest to many in this photography-obsessed region will be Fraenkel Gallery's 40th anniversary exhibition, "Long Story Short" (through Jan. 18). Jeffrey Fraenkel and Frish Brandt have built their business into one of the best of its kind worldwide. They did that by focusing first on great images and letting the commerce develop organically.

A case in point is the entertaining current show. It includes works by masters like Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Romare Bearden, Sophie Calle and Alfred Stieglitz but pays equal attention to a large number of irresistibly confounding pictures labeled, simply, "photographer unknown."

Edifice complex

The Mexico City artist Damián Ortega is known for an eclectic body of sculptural work. Often, elemental concepts of construction or its crafted opposite – controlled erosion and meticulous disassembly – are at the center of his method. His use of unconventional materials and surprising images calls a different kind of attention to the idea of building. A 1998 work in the collection of New York's Guggenheim Museum, for example, might be a Constructivist sculpture dating to the early 20th century, were it not pieced together of interlocking discs of hardened tortillas.

That sense of whimsy is an Ortega trademark. For his show at Adrian Rosenfeld, "Estridentópolis," in collaboration with the prominent Mexican gallery Kurimanzutto, seven hybrid buildings sprout animal heads and appendages. Each stands about 8 feet high or taller and references an architecturally distinguished high-rise in a major city – the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings in New York, Chicago's Marina Towers, and so forth. All are lovingly formed of discarded paper bags that once held cement. These are put to use as papier-mâché (in Spanish, *papel maché*) and as pasted sheets, carefully matched so that the colorful typography becomes a decorative element.

A cement-bag "Working Class Shirt," overalls and work gloves in the show hint at the unlikely parity of humble human labor and utopian aspiration that formed our modern, Modernist cities.

Restructuring perception

Miriam Böhm's exhibition "While, Weil," at Ratio 3 through Dec. 20, is a bracing mind game with a refreshing visual payoff. The best word for how one feels after spending 45 minutes carefully unraveling Böhm's photographic puzzles? Restored.

The Berlin artist takes three basic approaches. Least engaging at the surface level, yet challenging on closer inspection, are photographs of what appear to be cut scraps of cardboard and other photos, which are pieced together into abstract designs. Their interest derives from minute clues to their construction, provided by shifts of focus and light across the picture plane, and barely discernible imperfections of cutting and matching.

More baffling are large rectangular scrims, subtly painted to suggest that rectangular apertures have been cut from their centers. Another layer of illusion is added by hanging each scrim in front of photographic wallpaper that depicts, yep, a rectangular aperture.

The best works by far, however, are rephotographed landscape images that have been folded, cut, repositioned, subtly lighted and otherwise altered to disorienting effect. These works pose once again what had seemed a long-solved conundrum, calling on us to enter the psychosocial fray that sets picture against the thing pictured, and then against the world.



"Tusked 1" is a 2019 work by Rose B. Simpson. Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery

Native talent

If Rose B. Simpson had her way, viewers of her somber clay figures would know the history of Native American bravery in the face of colonialism and genocide. They would respect the complexities of her Tewa tribal culture of the American Southwest, and the distinction between her own Pueblo of Santa Clara and that of San Ildefonso. But there's a great deal they would never learn, because there is much that is meant to be private, even sacred. To be shared among Tewa alone.



Rose B. Simpson's 4½-foot-tall "Frère 1" is on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Dec.21.Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery

I found this out over the course of a delightful conversation I had with Simpson at a small party in her honor. I was pleased, not least because it justified the approach I always take to unfamiliar art. I don't generally talk to artists or curators before I write a review. I assume I can never know all the references and life experiences that may be relevant to the work. That frees me to take it in on equal human terms. Of course, as in any social interaction, the more we learn about an artist's language and approach, the deeper our appreciation. But that comes best after engagement with the art, not before.



Rose B. Simpson's "River Girl A" is among the works in the Jessica Silverman Gallery show.Photo: John Wilson White, Jessica Silverman Gallery

There is, in any case, a regal solemnity about the figures in Simpson's exhibition "Duo," at Jessica Silverman Gallery through Dec. 21, that seems outside of culture. Or, more precisely, that supersedes any single society.

The title of the exhibition is reflected by the works throughout. Siblings, lovers and alter egos; pairing, coupling and mirroring. A pair of Janus-like figures look to the past and to the future, symbolizing at once both beginning and end.

"Long Story Short": 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Jan. 18. Free. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. 415-981-2661. <https://fraenkelgallery.com>

Damián Ortega: "Estridentópolis": 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Jan. 25. Free. Adrian Rosenfeld, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-285-2841. adrianrosenfeld.com

Miriam Böhm: "While, Weil": 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 20. Free. Ratio 3, 2831-A Mission St., S.F. 415-821-3371. <https://ratio3.org>

Rose B. Simpson: "Duo": 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 21. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 415-255-9508. <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com>