



"Catherine Wagner's Central Subway installation aims to reflect S.F.'s past and present"

By Tony Bravo

November 18, 2022



"Arc Cycle," by photographer and conceptual artist Catherine Wagner, is seen at the entrance of the new Yerba Buena / Moscone Muni Station. Photo: Stephen Lam / The Chronicle

Entering the new Yerba Buena/Moscone Muni station from Fourth Street, visitors are confronted by ghosts from the neighborhood's past.

Etched like a phantom on a glass wall is an image of rising rebar towers from San Francisco photo artist Catherine Wagner's 1978-84 series "Moscone Site." Collectively, the photos show the construction of buildings that now stand just steps from the station. Downstairs, further images from the series are more defined, better revealing the Moscone Center beginning to take form. The installation, titled "Arc Cycle," may appear to be a traditional photo mural, but the six images underground, beyond the fare gates are laser etchings on granite, the process developed carefully for maximum clarity and depth.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

The 69-year-old artist took her "Moscone" photos when she was in her 20s, at first covertly, then with the permission of the construction managers at the convention center. Wagner was studying photography in the graduate program at San Francisco State when she began hopping fences to sneak onto the construction site armed with a large format camera, complete with focusing cloth, and a fellowship grant from the National Endowment of the Arts.

What she captured was both immediate and timeless, hyperlocal and yet universal, as modern cities seem to remain constantly under construction.

"There's something intellectual and emotional about the process (of building) that to me is really what I was asking about," Wagner said of the Moscone images during a recent visit to the station before its unveiling Saturday, Nov. 19.

"Arc Cycle" is one of 10 new public art pieces selected by the San Francisco Arts Commission that aims to enrich the new Muni Central Subway stations and platform after a decade-long commissioning and building process.

"Moscone Site"(recently acquired by the Tate Modern) also helped Wagner crystallize some of themes that have been central to her practice in the four decades since – particularly the concept of "architecture in reverse" through visual depictions of time and process.



A detail from an image from Catherine Wagner's "Arc Cycle" is seen on the concourse level at the Yerba Buena/Moscone Central Subway Station. Wagner documented the construction of the Moscone Center in the late 1970s and translated some of her photographs into multiple large scale permanent works. Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

"It's work about ordering the world, about creating systems and how architecture is related to other ways that we try to structure the world," said Erin O'Toole, the curator and head of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where Wagner's work is in the permanent collection. "I think that it all comes back to her interest in the urban, built environment of her hometown, and the radical transformation of the city that happened over the years."

Beyond the specific SoMa history Wagner brings to life with "Arc Cycle," there is also a certain relevance to the work of a half-Filipina artist like Wagner adorning a Muni station set in what was once the center of the city's Filipino community. "Arc Cycle," in fact, documents one of the pivotal events that displaced much of that population from the neighborhood, now designated San Francisco's Filipino Cultural District.

While Wagner's family did not live in that community — she spent her childhood first in the middle class neighborhood of Miraloma Park before her German father, Eric Wagner, and mother Maria Monsie, a native of Manilla, moved the family to Kentfield — in a sense, these images of displacement by an internationally collected, locally born artist of Filipina heritage bring the story of the area full circle.

"The seed was already there," said San Francisco photographer Hal Fischer, who attended SFSU's graduate program with Wagner. "Her photos already showed not just a strong eye because a lot of people have a good eye, but it showed a direction that was really establishing where she would go with her career."



Photographer and conceptual artist Catherine Wagner stands before her public art installation "Arc Cycle" at the new Yerba Buena/Moscone Muni Station on Oct. 17, 2022. Photo: Stephen Lam / The Chronicle

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Visiting the station with Wagner, whose career has also included chairing the arts and visual culture department at Mills College as well as receiving the prestigious Rome Prize and Guggenheim Fellowship, reveals certain aspects of her practice. Up close to the panels, she indicates how fine the quality of the etching is, revealing shades of gray and white more subtle than she initially thought possible. She notes aspects of the installation still under construction — temporary lighting, equipment out of place, unfinished wall text. Wagner has an attention to detail and precision that is as much a part of her personality as it is her artistic practice.

"Catherine is always thinking, always talking about her ideas. She can walk into any situation with somebody and can say, 'Well, what do you think about this?'" said Wagner's wife, landscape architect Loretta Gargan. "Sometimes, I can't understand how she can do so many different things at once. But she has the ability to really cast a very broad net and (move) in a lot of different directions."

Wagner makes sure when discussing "Arc Cycle," it's referred to as its own piece of art as much as it is a product of the "Moscone" images. Large-scale public installations of this type have been a significant part of her practice for the last 20 years. The first was a 2002 photo mural, "-86 Degree Freezers," at the Comme des Garcons boutique in Kyoto, using images from her 1995 series "Art & Science: Investigating Matter."

Gallerist Jessica Silverman, who has represented Wagner since 2020, said that public works like Wagner's 2018 photo mural "Sala dela Imperatori" at San Francisco's Saint Joseph's Arts Society are an example of how the artist's practice "moves out of and through photography in different ways" as she's evolved creatively.

"One of the things she's been really successful at is translating her photographic practice into three-dimensional space through different materials," said Silverman.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Catherine Wagner walks along her public art installation "Arc Cycle" at the new Yerba Buena/ Moscone Muni Station on Oct. 17, 2022. Photo: Stephen Lam / The Chronicle

She noted that "Arc Cycle" also asks people to consider the geography of the neighborhood in how it's installed.

"When I was looking at it, I kept trying to locate where we were in the images, to try to identify what is there now and what's north, south, east and west. That's part of how it's laid out, and I think a lot of people are going to have that experience," Silverman said.

That the station/art opening comes amid a flurry of shows and projects for Wagner is no surprise to those who know her prolific output.

Last year, Wagner had her first show at Silverman's gallery, "Clues to Civilization," and was among the artists featured in "New Time: Art and Feminisms in the 21st Century" at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. In January of this year, Wagner's show of prints, "End Grain: The Displaced Shadow," opened at San Francisco's Crown Point Press, a first for the artist. It was followed by her curation of the group show "Transparency & Opacity" at the St. Joseph's. Now Wagner is working with Saint Joseph's founder Ken Fulk on a new project, "Wall Tape Constructions," at the Mary Heaton Vorse House in Provincetown, Mass.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Next spring, BAMPFA plans to honor Wagner (who is a board member at the organization) for her contributions to Bay Area art at its annual Art + Film gala.

"Historically, artists of Catherine's generation and older were really told you have to pick your lane and stick with it, you have to have an identifiable style," said BAMPFA director Julie Rodrigues Widholm. "I appreciate how she allows herself to not be stuck or pigeonholed or limited into a certain way of working. And I do think that's a kind of pioneering way of working, especially for photographers."



Catherine Wagner (right) with wife Loretta Gargan and dog Ronan at their home in San Francisco on Oct. 8. Photo: Stephen Lam / The Chronicle

Gargan said that in recent years, she's seen Wagner take more time to enjoy her success, which Wagner confirmed during a visit to her Bernal Height home. But both quickly point out that her motivation to work remains unchanged.

"There's a kind of rigor and a substance to the kind of work I do," said Wagner.

Early in their relationship, Wagner was skeptical about being able to be out of her studio for a month for a trip to Italy. But now, the pair said, they make that time. The couple also have a home in Marin not far from where Wagner grew up, where they can retreat to on weekends, with their standard poodle Ronan, and unplug from their high-powered careers.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

"There is something rewarding about recognizing that in these 30-plus years of making work, it feels like it's built on a solid foundation," said Wagner.

"You don't build a house on a weak foundation. In that work, I see a strong foundation, but I'm also looking at it again and thinking like, 'Wow, I was 23 when I was doing that. I must have been one serious kid.'"

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508