

San Francisco Chronicle

Andrea Bowers: "Final exhibition at McEvoy Foundation for the Arts asks, 'What Are Words Worth?'"

By Tony Bravo
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Installation view, "What Are Words Worth?." At the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts. Photo by Henrik Kam

"What Are Words Worth?" at McEvoy Foundation for the Arts is very good. The show is also, unfortunately, the last one the San Francisco arts organization will present.

In March, McEvoy announced that it would close after six years of presenting exhibitions and programming utilizing the McEvoy Family Art Collection. But the McEvoy family promised that "although we will no longer have the physical space for curated shows, the art collection will remain with the McEvoy family and works from it will travel, as before, to select exhibitions," according to a statement.

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Since founder Nion McEvoy and director Susan Miller opened the doors to the space at the Minnesota Street Project contemporary art campus in Dogpatch in 2017, there have been some wonderful shows: *"What Is an Edition, Anyway"* in 2019 celebrated both books and ideas of creation versus replication in culture. *"Orlando,"* curated by actor Tilda Swinton, celebrated Virginia Woolf's title character in media after the Aperture Foundation presented it in New York City. Later that year, Isaac Julien's multi-screen film *"Lessons of the Hour: Frederick Douglass"* shocked us back into art-going following the first pandemic shutdown, and it was an audacious way of confronting the post-George Floyd social landscape (though it had been programmed long before Floyd's murder by police in May 2020).

The current *"What Are Words Worth?"* takes its title from Tom Tom Club's 1981 song "Wordy Rappinghood," referencing the poet William Wordsworth. The show revolves around works from the collection that engage language, literature and typography. It's a fitting tribute to Nion McEvoy, the publisher of Chronicle Books (not affiliated with The Chronicle), and his mother Nan Tucker McEvoy, granddaughter of Chronicle co-founder M.H. de Young.



Zoe Leonard "Photography is..." 2016. 51 books. Photo: © Zoe Leonard

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"The collection itself is very personal," said Miller. "It's the artists and the works that meant a lot to Nion and Nan in particular. We felt that these works told a very tight story about some of the ideas around language that are in the collection, ideas of voice and power (and) ideas of politics and position."

In an overwhelmingly digital world, a show that feels like a love letter to newspapers and books has a special poignancy.

Larry Sultan's "Business Page" from 1985 showing a man hidden behind an unfolded newspaper has an almost tactile quality, as though the print may smear on your hands from the rumpled pages. Bernice Abbott's 1935 "Newsstand, East 32nd Street and Third Avenue, Manhattan" is less about words and more an exquisite collection of faces peering at viewers from magazine covers.

Books are the focus of Sharka Hyland's 2013 series of works on paper re-creating texts from volumes of Marcel Proust's novel "À la recherche du temps perdu" and Zoe Leonard's 2016 sculpture "Photography Is..." consisting of 51 stacked copies of Wyatt Hyland's title book.

Robert Mapplethorpe's companion "Picture/Self Portrait" photos from 1977 show a hand writing in neat cursive font, first while wearing a watch and striped dress shirt sleeve, and in the next image, a leather glove and studded bracelet. It feels like both a nod to queer forebear Jean Cocteau's use of handwriting and a funny meditation on duality.

Photography is an especially rich part of both the show and collection, with works by Lee Friedlander, Micha Bar-Am, Weegee, Robert Frank, Accra Shepp, Alfred Eisenstaedt and others. Friedlander's "New Orleans" from 1975 shows a street sign reading "Mystery" in front of a burnt tree on a median, giving the image a stark, haunted-house quality. Weegee's "Apes, Men & Morons (Stripper Reading a Book)" is the most slyly humorous photo, as the subject glances at the tome knowingly, her rhinestone bralette barely covered by a crochet dressing gown.

Among the works referencing politics, "Favored Son," Mitchell Anderson's oversized painted "Kennedy" campaign button from 2017, has a memorable pop vibrancy, while Daniel Kramer's photograph "Bob Dylan and Joan Baez with Protest Sign, Newark Airport, New Jersey" from 1964 is as much a celebration of font as it is the era's civil disobedience.

A portion of the exhibition is also dedicated to works by the German conceptual photographer Natalie Czech, who created poems in the repetition and highlighting of text on everyday materials like album covers and newspapers. "A Poem by Repetition by Emmett Williams 2" from 2018 uses the Andy Warhol-illustrated cover of the Velvet Underground's single "I'm Waiting for the Man" and "There She Goes Again" to spell out "She go. He go. Ego."

And so goes the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts, which is set to close Sept. 2. Thankfully, the collection will remain together and still be loaned for exhibitions at other institutions. But its contributions of visual art, film and performance to San Francisco will be missed.

Perhaps the most worthy words to end with are the ones on Andrea Bower's 2016 neon sculpture: "Community or Chaos."

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Andrea Bowers, "Community or Chaos," 2016 Aluminum, cardboard, paint and neon. Photo: Andrea Bowers

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