

Rupy C. Tut: "Craft and Community Center Stage for SECA Winners"

By Max Blue

January 2025



For more than 50 years, the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) Award at SFMOMA has given Bay Area artists a shot at one of the biggest stages in town, while offering viewers a snapshot of the local scene. The picture this year's free exhibition paints is one of diversity and dedication to craft and community, deeply rooted in local legacies despite the continued difficulty of making it as an artist in the Bay Area.

This year's awardees, Rose D'Amato, Angela Hennessy and Rupy C. Tut, were selected by Shana Lopes, SFMOMA's assistant curator of photography and Maria Castro, SFMOMA's associate curator of painting and sculpture, from over 160 portfolio submissions from across the nine Bay Area counties. "All three artists have unique approaches to materials and connections to inherited traditions," Castro told SF/ARTS.

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Rose D'Amato. Photo by Samantha Tyler Cooper.

Rose D'Amato, who graduated from the since-defunct San Francisco Art Institute in 2016, comes to fine art painting with a professional background as a sign painter and automotive pinstriper. Her visual inspirations also come from sign painting and the lowrider culture she immerses herself in.

Rupy C. Tut (*main image - photo by Samantha Tyler Cooper*) has lived in the Bay for the past 13 years, but says she only started calling herself an artist about 10 years ago. Her background isn't the expected art school route - she has a Masters of Public Health - but was trained in traditional 18th century Indian painting techniques, which include hand-grinding her own pigments, and painting with a specialized, fine point brush on linen and paper.



Angela Hennessy. Photo by Airyka Rockefeller

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Angela Hennessy moved to the Bay Area 30 years ago to attend California College of the Arts, where she's been a faculty member for over half that time. Her artwork focuses on death and grief, often taking the form of large-scale, abstract sculptures made from hair and incorporating traditional forms of braiding, weaving and stitching.

During the selection process, Castro said that "a priority was thinking about artists and works that would bring new perspectives to the museum."

Each artist is also using the opportunity to try something new in her own art practice. Hennessy's SECA installation includes wreaths similar to those that would adorn a funeral or wake, and floor sculptures, as well as an audio recording of a call-and-response incantation featuring the voices of fellow artists. While Hennessy has made audio work before, this is the first time she's invited collaborators. "I wanted to really take this opportunity to dream a little bigger," Hennessy said, "and think about how I could bring not only my voice but the voices of some of my friends into the exhibition as well."

D'Amato is also including members of her community in the exhibition, in photographic prints and Super 8 film footage of the car shop where she spends most of her time creating the paintings that will also be on view, inspired by hand lettering and pinstriping. "SECA has been a great opportunity to focus on painting for myself," she said. "I'm just recently devoting all of my attention to this and thinking about what ideas a painting I make needs to hold."

Tut's work features a collaborative element, too - with the audience. Beside paintings on linen and paper that explore the myths and many meanings of dreams, Tut will invite viewers to leave written responses in an offering well. She hopes this will help people to ruminate on the dreams they've had to give up to be where they are today and what dreams they might honor in the future. "We're not always thinking about what we really value and care about," Tut said "There is so much in us that we haven't had a chance to put down. As an artist, I get to do that every day. But not everyone does."

While the SECA Awards aren't chosen based on similarities between artists, some natural threads emerged during the selection process. "We're all women of color working through specific histories and the traditions of our materials and disciplines," Hennessy said. "And we each use beauty strategically. Beauty can be so problematic and revealing of Western European hierarchies and aesthetics. We're all using beauty in a way that cannot be dismissed as superficial but is rather complex."

Another common thread uniting these artists? Succeeding despite the adversarial conditions of living in the Bay Area. While SECA makes clear that, as Lopes said, "the art scene is not dead in San Francisco," that doesn't mean that it doesn't have its challenges. "When I first moved here," D'Amato said, "I used to ride the bus around at night with groups of other artists, going to small galleries in the Tenderloin and Chinatown. Now the pace has changed and there are fewer small art spaces. When I see my friends expressing their creative will, I have such a greater appreciation for it, because it's so hard to do now."

A lot has happened over the last decade to impact Bay Area artists - not least of which a global pandemic - but the cost of living remains a predominant inhibitor. "This is a difficult place to try to make an art practice when rents are at the rates we see them," Hennessy said. "But I think the community itself is stronger than ever, especially in BIPOC spaces."

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Perhaps that renewed solidarity is one effect of the continued struggle artists face maintaining their foothold in the Bay Area. "I think you really have to find your support network right now to keep going," D'Amato said.

For Tut, the Bay Area is "a place where you can change and experiment," she said. "You can grow without a fear of making mistakes and taking risks. The art ecosystem celebrates you for the work you're doing. You don't have to just check certain boxes."

Hennessy says that being a Bay Area artist also "feels a little bit sketchy because of how much censorship we're seeing in the art world today." But the Bay Area's grand traditions of protest and solidarity give her hope. "Part of the Bay Area's history is built upon speaking uncomfortable truths and imagining and dreaming how our communities and spaces can be more inclusive, just and equitable," she said. "In that sense, I feel like I'm in good company."

→ The 2024 SECA Art Award, SFMOMA, December 12 - May 25, 2025. Free.

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