

# HYPERALLERGIC

Isaac Julien: "10 Exhibitions to See in San Francisco This Spring: An overdue retrospective of Ruth Asawa, Wayne Thiebaud's art historical influences, Susan Weil's otherworldly experiments, and more."

By Max Blue

March 18, 2025



Wayne Thiebaud, "Three Machines" (1963), oil on canvas (© Wayne Thiebaud Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; photo by Randy Dodson, courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

This is a hard time. I'm sure I'm not the only one feeling fear and anxiety as the United States seems to spiral. I maintain an insistence on seeking solace in art, and sometimes I've had to drag myself by the ear. But the artists I like best remind me why I return, again and again, in times of uncertainty.

This spring, museums and galleries throughout the San Francisco Bay Area shine a spotlight on the region's history of art and radicalism, from celebrating seminal local figures like Ruth Asawa and Wayne Thiebaud to contemporary artists engaging with some of the most pressing questions of our moment. I am inspired by the sight of others creating beauty from the nightmarish realities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, internment camps, climate change, and colonialism. It feels like snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. Or, if not victory, then at least a reason to continue working toward it.

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**Sophie Calle**

**Fraenkel Gallery**, 49 Geary Street #450, San Francisco, California

Through Apr 12



Sophie Calle, "Calle-Joconde (Wrong turn)" (2025), text panel in artist's frame, two pigment prints in artists frames, thread, pigment print in cardboard frame (photo by Claire Dorn, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery)

Good artists copy, great artists steal — greater artists fail? In her latest solo show, postmodernist grand dame Sophie Calle exhibits abandoned projects, alongside a description of what might have been, a frank explanation for its failure stamped in red below the accompanying wall text. My personal favorite? A series of photos of Calle and a look-alike girlfriend posing with identical twins Emmanuel and Max across time. But then Max died. It's a generous peek behind the curtain, refreshingly rethinking when a work of art is finished.

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**Susan Weil**

**COL Gallery**, 887 Beach Street, San Francisco, California

Through May 9



Susan Weil "Collage Figure" (1966), acrylic, collage on plexiglass (courtesy the artist and JDJ, New York)

A Black Mountain College graduate alongside Asawa and Elaine de Kooning, Susan Weil has long brought a feminist bent to abstract art. Spanning the nonagenarian artist's career, this exhibition emphasizes her lifelong fascination with human forms and experimentation. These silkscreens, collages, and paintings are at once strange and familiar, natural and otherworldly. In "Collage Figure" (1966), for instance, photographs of nude bodies are obscured by writhing layers of acrylics, playfully revising a classical art trope.

**Matisse's Jazz Unbound**

**de Young Museum**, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, San Francisco, California

Through July 6



Henri Matisse, "V – Horse, Rider and Clown (Le cheval, L'Écuyere et le Clown)" (1947), color stencil print (photograph by Randy Dodson, courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

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I fell in love with Matisse almost 30 years ago, when I first saw his painting “La Conversation” (1938) at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and again at the de Young Museum’s exhibition *Jazz Unbound*. Featuring the pages of Matisse’s 1947 artist’s book *Jazz* framed and hung in a single gallery, the show exemplifies the height of the artist’s cut-out era. From circus animals to dancing figures, the color stencil prints are at once a charming and masterful reminder that books can be art.

***Ancestral Visions: An Installation by Chelsea Ryoko Wong***

**Oakland Museum of California**, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland, California

Through February 1, 2026



Installation view of *Ancestral Visions: An Installation by Chelsea Ryoko Wong* (photo by Kamiko Fujii, courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco)

Silk meets canvas in Chelsea Ryoko Wong’s paintings of Chinese-American women in the Bay Area. Displayed alongside traditional Chinese dresses from the museum’s permanent collection, the paintings envision the lives of the women who wore them. “Chasing Dreams” (2024) depicts children playing on a Chinatown street, while another work depicts said dream made manifest: In it, two women watch children play on Ocean Beach from their living room window. From Chinatown to the suburbs, these vibrant and intimate stories are connected by the thread of fashion.

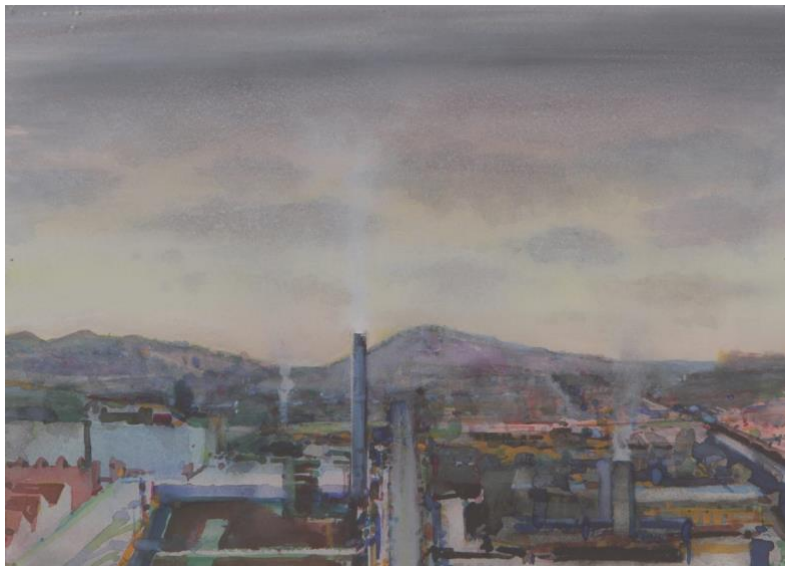
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**Wayne Thiebaud: Art Comes from Art**

Legion of Honor, 100 34th Avenue, San Francisco, California

March 22–August 17



Wayne Thiebaud, "View from Potrero Hill" (1987), transparent and opaque watercolor on paper (photo by Michael Trask Photography, courtesy the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation)

Now, this artist steals. This Wayne Thiebaud survey pays tribute to the late, great painter by examining his influences, contextualizing 60 original works in art history through works that inspired them. On view, for instance, is a straight copy of Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" (1884–86), and the exhibition outlines the way Flemish still lifes inspired his famous cake paintings. It's an apt celebration of Thiebaud's life, cementing his place in the lineage of painting.

**Yuan Goang-Ming: Everyday War**

Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, California

April 3–July 7



Yuan Goang-Ming, "Everyday Maneuver" (2018), single-channel video (courtesy the artist)

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How do we find peace during times of unrest? Coming off an acclaimed stint at the 2024 Venice Biennale, Yuan Goang-Ming offers answers in his first North American solo show. *Everyday War* includes video installations spanning the Taiwanese artist's career, from urban landscapes to footage of his bedroom literally exploding. Taken together, it's a meditation on the tumult of contemporary life.

**Ruth Asawa: Retrospective**

**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 3rd Street, San Francisco, California**

April 5–September 2



Ruth Asawa and her granddaughter Emma Lanier with Japanese American Internment Memorial (1990-94), commissioned by the City of San José (photo by Laurence Cuneo, courtesy David Zwirner)

How well do you know Ruth Asawa? You've seen the hanging wire sculptures, sure, or maybe her public artworks dotting the city. But the first major museum retrospective of the local legend promises the most expansive view yet of the artist's practice. Here, we'll see paintings, drawings, and more, alongside work by her contemporaries — it's a show as comprehensive as it is overdue.

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**Isaac Julien: I Dream A World**

**de Young Museum**, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, San Francisco, California

April 12–July 13



Isaac Julien, “Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series),” (1989/2016), Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum and framed (courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro gallery).

Isaac Julien’s films carry the weight of history. This survey of his work at the de Young packs a heavy punch, while giving visitors the opportunity to sit with the scope of his work. Spanning Julien’s career from 1999 to 2022, the 10 films shot across the world from Europe to the Caribbean explore different ways colonialism has shaped the lives of historical figures, from Frederick Douglass to Alain Locke, as well as our own contemporary world.

**Future Flows**

**Marin Museum of Contemporary Art**, 1210 Fifth Avenue, San Rafael, California

April 19–July 6



Installation view of Pete Belkin, “Wave Set Tessellation,” (2022), multi-channel video (photo by and courtesy the artist)

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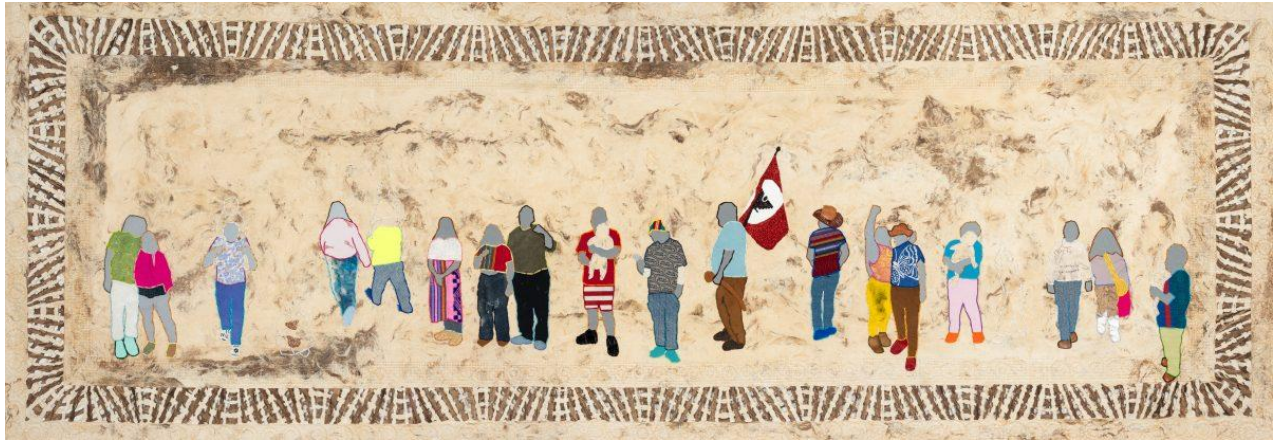
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In *Future Flows*, the Marin Museum of Contemporary Art communes with its natural surroundings in downtown San Rafael, at the edge of the San Francisco Bay Estuary. Taking climate change to task, the 10 artists in this group show dive into water as a critical element for sustainability. Pete Belkin's video installation depicts churning waves, while Carolina Caycedo's collage of satellite photos depicts the progressive drying out of the Yuma River. What can the bay in our own backyard — and art made about it — tell us about our planet's future?

**Arleene Correa Valencia: Codice Del Perdedor / The Losing Man's Codex**

**Catharine Clark Gallery, 248 Utah Street, San Francisco, California**

May 31–July 9



Arleene Correa Valencia, "I Do Not Give You Permission To Enter My Home Based On My 4th Amendment Rights Under The United States Constitution," (2025), acrylic, textiles, thread, and beads on Amate made by Jose Daniel Santos De La Puerta (photo by Adrian Osnaya, courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery)

What can we learn from loss? Made on the same *amate* paper that Indigenous South Americans used to illustrate their stories of migration, the paintings in *Codice Del Perdedor* respond to a moment of acute danger for migrant communities in the United States. One scroll-like painting of a group of people walking might invoke a scene of migration or a celebratory parade, a United Farm Workers flag held high. Altogether, the exhibition explores humanity when survival is at stake, looking to beauty as a form of persistence.

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