

## RENA BRANSTEN PROJECTS

### “Bay Area Now” Proposes a Refreshing Biennial Model

by Ashton Cooper, BLOUIN ARTINFO INTERNATIONAL, 07/24/2014



An installation view of Nathan Lynch, FOR-SITE Foundation, *Bay Area Now 7*, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. (Photo by Tammy Lau)

For the past few months, the [swirl](#) of [controversy](#) around the Whitney Biennial has stirred dialogue and debate about exclusion and invisibility in the art world. Catalyzed by the [withdrawal](#) of the “mostly black and mostly queer” [Yams Collective](#), much of the conversation has centered on the ways in which curatorial processes can perpetuate institutional racism and sexism.

With these considerations still fresh in my mind, seeing the [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#)’s “[Bay Area Now](#)” triennial felt invigorating in its proposal of one kind of solution to the exclusionary problems inherent in such bi(or tri)ennial surveys. For the museum’s seventh such regional show, co-curators Betti-Sue Hertz and Ceci Moss relied not on their own subjective choices, but turned the show over to 15 local art spaces and non-profits that were chosen through an application process. From the San Quentin Prison Arts Project (which has been providing art workshops to inmates since 1977) to [n/a](#) (an exhibition space for queer art located in an Oakland apartment that opened in May 2013), each organization curated a specific space or series of spaces within the museum.

Among the diverse presentations, three San Francisco-based organizations stand out for their boundary-pushing, thought-provoking shows-within-the-show.

## RENA BRANSTEN PROJECTS

Creativity Explored, an organization that works with developmentally disabled artists, put together the three-artist presentation “Next Big Thing,” curated by Vanesa Gingold and Grace Rosario Perkins. As much as I loved Christina Marie Fong’s bright paintings and works on paper and Anthony “Tony” Gomez’s hanging mixed media sculptures, the standout was Marilyn Wong’s mixed media installation “Sexy Diva’s in the House.” The life-size work is a warped, handmade recreation of her bedroom with nearly every inch covered in her distinctive drawing style, including walls plastered with dozens of reimaginings of classic horror movie posters — like a frenetic update on Tracey Emin’s “My Bed.” While so-called Outsider artists (a fraught term that often encompasses those with disabilities) have been popular exhibition fodder lately, this display proves that the problematic label isn’t necessary. The work stands on its own.

The For-Site Foundation, which supports “art about place” through residencies and other programming, is one of the few participants that chose to show work from just one artist. “Dead Reckoning,” curated by Jackie von Treskow, is a presentation of three towering buoy-inspired sculptures (ranging from 8.4 to 16 feet tall) created by **Nathan Lynch**. Composed of donut-shaped, roughly hewn redwood bases that support playful ceramic tops in different oozing and plant-like organic shapes, the sculptures’ unexpected pairings of materials make for delightful, otherworldly Willy Wonka-like objects. The wall text explains that the title names “the process of calculating one’s position at sea by estimating the direction and distance traveled rather than by using landmarks, astronomical observations, or electronic navigation methods. Dead reckoning is subject to cumulative errors.” A quasi-poetic text painted on the wall about drifting at sea drives that point home further, but the sculptures would have been even stronger without so much thematic guidance.

Artist-run space [2nd floor projects] showed nine 5-foot-wide photos by Daniel Case and intriguing inner tube sculptures by Nicolaus Chaffin in “Eros/On,” a presentation about queer visibility and “the erasure of queer lineage,” curated by Margaret Tedesco. Context is key in Case’s quiet, depopulated beach landscapes, which picture Northern California’s “coastal cruising trails and sex spots.” The titles — “Circle,” “Nest,” “Spiral” — refer to the shapes of outcroppings of wood and stones that have been arranged by successive visitors. This carving out of queer space, however, is temporary — the wall text explains that these areas are usually cleared or washed away. The photographs seem unassuming, but, in a single image, radically invoke the specifically queer historical narratives of these sites. This queer narrative and the many others encompassed in the show all find a place within the museum. The multi-pronged structure of the triennial felt fresh for many reasons: it shifted the attention from artists to organizations, it celebrated things happening outside of the mainstream gallery and museum world, and it emphasized process and the processes by which art is, or is not, exhibited. The dissonance of voices is what makes this show great.