

Vainsencher, Gabriela. "From Black Performance to Stuff on a Shelf, a Visit to Five Shows in San Francisco," *Hyperallergic*, August 11, 2015.

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SAN FRANCISCO – It's summer in the USA, and that means it's group-show season on both coasts. Since group shows are a means of rounding up artists to make aesthetic and philosophical points, it seemed only fair that I do the same and corral a bunch of them (plus two solo shows) in this non-comprehensive review of a few San Francisco galleries and nonprofits.

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art takes up the first floor of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA). This traveling show, organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, ambitiously endeavors to survey over 50 years of performance done by American artists of African descent in the context of the visual arts (as opposed to dance, theater, and music). The exhibition looks great, which is saying a lot for a show that seeks to present performance, the most ephemeral of the fine arts, in a gallery setting. (The show is accompanied by live performances throughout its duration, but doesn't feel incomplete without them.) While all the usual means of art documentation are used (video and photo, sets and artifacts), their arrangement is spacious and made me want to stick around and explore. I started by watching my favorite video by Hennessy Youngman (the cuddly gangsta YouTube alter ego of artist Jayson Musson), the one about how Bruce Nauman has already executed every single art idea anyone could ever have. Musson's videos are so entertaining that it's easy to forget they're extreme examples of preaching to the art choir. Try watching one of these with a non-art person and you'll see what I'm talking about.

One idea Bruce Nauman didn't come up with was eating – and passing – the Wall Street Journal while sitting on an elevated toilet. That was William Pope.L's idea, and it is majestically re-created in the next gallery. Other highlights are a ghostly slideshow of David Hammons's "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," for which the artist sold snowballs on the streets of New York City during a 1983 blizzard, and artifacts ranging from outstretched, weighted-down pantyhose used by Maren Hassinger when she performed Senga Nengudi's "RSVP" (1975-77/2012) to painted bullhorns by Terry Adkins. On the downside, the show is very male-oriented, with only about 20% female representation. Tellingly, that 20% is excellent, as represented by Tameka Norris's visceral performance that left an unforgettable trace on the gallery wall, and by Lorraine O'Grady's photo documentation of "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" (1980-83), in which she dressed up as a sash-wearing beauty queen wielding a cat o' nine tails whip and crashed art openings around town. Laughter and pain are two predominant feelings in the show, the one always dangerously close to the other.

A perfect pairing with Radical Presence comes a couple blocks down Mission Street at the Museum of the African Diaspora, which is hosting a portraiture show from SFMOMA's collection. The exhibition focuses on the African American visage, and the show stealer is Fred Wilson's 1995 work "Me and It," which features a shelf packed with racist paraphernalia, flanked by two video screens. On one, Wilson mimics the gestures and stances of the black figures in the objects, his mouth becoming an ashtray, for example; in the other, a hand smashes the objects with a hammer. Around it, the show is a truly educational one, exploring the way black American identity is shaped by aspects as far-ranging as interior decorating, fabric design, television, and fashion (demonstrated in Mickalene Thomas's living-room installations), as well as the ancient traditions carried on by a formerly enslaved population, seen in Carrie Mae Weems's haunting "Boneyard" (1992).

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Back at the YBCA, the second floor was until recently taken up by Shana Moulton's solo exhibition *Picture Puzzle Pattern Door*, part of the center's curatorial series focusing on the relationship between art and technology. The show had a look I've been seeing (too?) much of recently, one that seems to take its cues from the nail-salon aesthetic – new age meets new media. A weird and funny video installation told the story of a character named Cynthia (portrayed by the artist) and her battle with irritable-bowel syndrome using a real biofeedback system, which was also available for viewers' testing elsewhere in the show. Video is made of light, and Moulton deftly used this material, shaping and cropping her projections to play with the space they were in as well as with the images within them. These videos did a much better job at activating the gallery than the actual physical objects displayed outside in the hall. Some of the objects (gloved mannequin hands, salt crystal lamps, acupuncture model of the human ear) appeared in the videos, but in person they didn't manage to rise above the stuff-in-a-row-on-a-shelf look.

Speaking of stuff on a shelf, one artist who's taken this up as theme and foil is Alejandro Almanza Pereda, currently showing work in both a group exhibition at Cult gallery and a large solo endeavor as artist-in-residence at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). At Cult, he has installed (if you can call it that) one of his glorious flirtations with failure, a shelf-based sculpture that uses a glass bowl, an upside-down figurine, and a neon light, among other things, as supports. It's so precariously assembled that it continues to appear fragile, temporary, and alive, even in the white cube.

The show this work is part of is titled *Sexxitecture*, and it explores the way desire and man-made spaces interact. Alongside Almanza Pereda's objects are Daniel Gerwin's works, which exist in a twilight zone between painting and sculpture, but also, and more interestingly, between being nostalgic about certain tropes of image-making (trompe l'oeil wood grain, fake perspective) and criticizing them. His best piece here is "Dress Up" (2014), a multipatterned confluence of wood that looks like it was literally slapped together and then attempted escape by slithering up the gallery wall. Another standout is Roman Liška's bizarre, two-piece "Dazzle Painting." Made with foamed rubber on linen, the canvases look like what would happen if Andy Warhol had played around with Puffy Paints. Like many of the works in this show, they are majorly desirable but cramped together. Maybe this is a statement about San Francisco real estate prices, the only things that make me feel like I get a deal on my place in Brooklyn.

If you like Almanza Pereda's work at Cult gallery, head on up to his solo show at SFAI. The magnificent campus is home to one of Diego Rivera's most beloved US murals, "The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City" (1931), a meta-work starring Rivera's ass plumply perched at the center of a scaffold used to paint the eponymous mural. In front of this work, Almanza Pereda has installed his own kind of scaffolding, made of white neon tubes. It both illuminates and blocks Rivera's work, and most importantly in 2015, it makes the whole thing impossible to photograph with a smartphone. Titled "Change the World or Go Home," the work encapsulates the kind of challenges the artist likes to give himself.

In the main gallery, he tackles another big one: trying to do something new with the still life. This seems like a long battle which has only just begun for Almanza Pereda, but here is a good start: he turns it upside down. The gallery is a mash-up of artist studio, fabrication workshop, flea market, and mad scientist laboratory. Off to one side is a giant shelving system bearing the results of weeks of rummaging through the Bay Area's flea markets. The objects on it, ranging from intensely ugly glassware to gorgeous hanging rope sculptures, make it clear that Almanza Pereda has a good eye both as an ironic artist and as an earnest collector of objects. What allows these things to rise above the stuff-on-a-shelf problem is that they function like a big palette which Almanza Pereda uses in making his videos. In the middle of the space sits an enormous, custom-built, indoor pool, the site to which all these objects are destined. Almanza Pereda uses the pool to stage and shoot his videos, a series of which is playing in the upstairs projection gallery. In these works, underwater conditions and

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clever tricks allow the artist to turn gravity on its head, causing ornate arrangements of organic and man-made objects to whimsically fly away, bounce on their bottoms, and slowly float up, erection-like.