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'We Remember the Sun': Recalling revolution

Reyhan Harmanci

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Many things have changed and many things have stayed the same since the chaos that was 1968. In "We Remember the Sun," San Francisco Art Institute curator Mary Ellyn Johnson has assembled a group of top-notch contemporary artists, including Michael Zheng, Shaun O'Dell, Andrea Bowers, Deer Fang, David Gurman and Taraneh Hemami, to consider the hangover from the youth revolution.

"There have been a lot of exhibitions and film screenings around the globe that relate to this history," Johnson says. "I wanted to do something that was more specific about the legacies that have been left, and the question of how these legacies have manifested themselves in artistic practice in California."

As the collection of work shows, today's artists employ different techniques than their brash historic counterparts, and use a variety of media to reflect on and take action in the world. Video artist Fang references the Olympic torch protests in her "Don't Talk About Politics" piece. Amy Balkin takes on the companies that are quietly profiting from the Iraq war in "Sell Us Your Liberty or We'll Subcontract Your Death," a collection of rubbings taken from the signage of the San Francisco companies involved. David Maisel, in the same "watch-the-watchers" spirit, contributes his large photographs of secret military sites. Other pieces, such as Julia Page's video that uses a historic Angela Davis speech, incorporate past works in different ways.

Johnson says that, as a whole, she sees today's artists taking on many of the same issues as their activist forebears, but with a more nuanced perspective. "What I found is there is a lot of work that is still responding to these utopian ideals," she says. "I was looking at

how a lot of artists seem to be looking at these failures and successes - and it's no longer black and white. It's a much more subtle time in some ways."

It seems that artists are less interested in speaking through a bullhorn about contemporary culture, and more apt to tend their own gardens. But the collection as a whole doesn't feel dour. "There are some pieces that are quite dark," Johnson says, pointing to Balkin's rubbings. "But there's also projects such as Andrea Bowers' 'Weight of Resistance,' which is a piece about the legacy of San Francisco's activism. It asks, where do we go from here?" The point is that resistance movements are alive and kicking, but not uncritically. "There are both kinds of messages in the works at the same time," Johnson says. "It's not over. We haven't completely given up on the idea of change."

Through Sept. 13. See Web site for related events. San Francisco Art Institute's Walter and McBean Galleries, 800 Chestnut St., S.F. (415) 749-4563. www.sfai.edu/current.

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