

# Aperto San Francisco

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ONE SATURDAY NIGHT in San Francisco, a scruffy crowd has spilled out from three adjacent storefronts and swelled across 14<sup>th</sup> Street, where it's mingling with the outdoor smokers from a bar and the couriers at the bicycle co-op next door. It's a loose, comfortable group. There are no *haute* socialites, no gaudy displays of wealth, and no powerful art world figures here. If there are celebrities present, they are of the indie

variety. Looking around, the prevalent fashions are understated, but they're subject to a strict code: one sees beards, shaggy hair, clothes made by friends, vintage Italian bicycles — all iterations of artful dishevelment and micromanaged neglect. Among the crowd there are few introductions; these people all know each other already. Almost every one of them is an artist or a musician; they are out here to support each other, to be

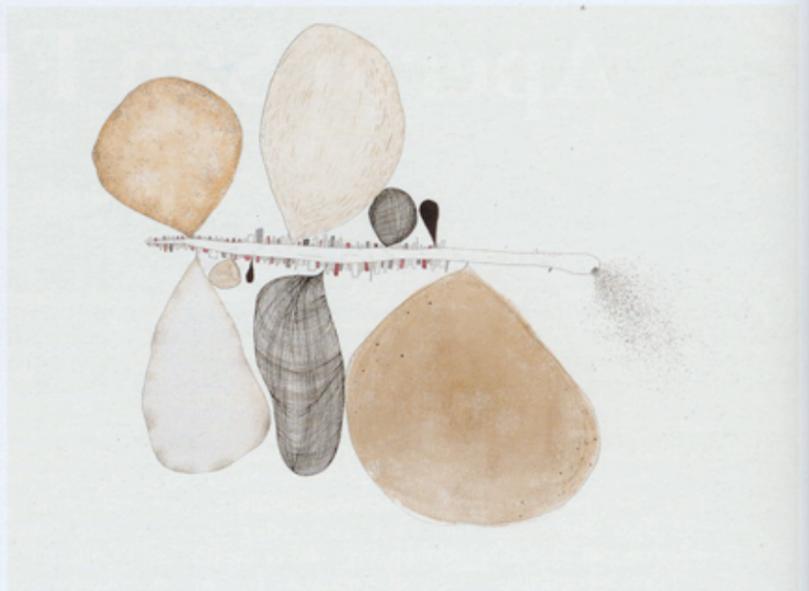
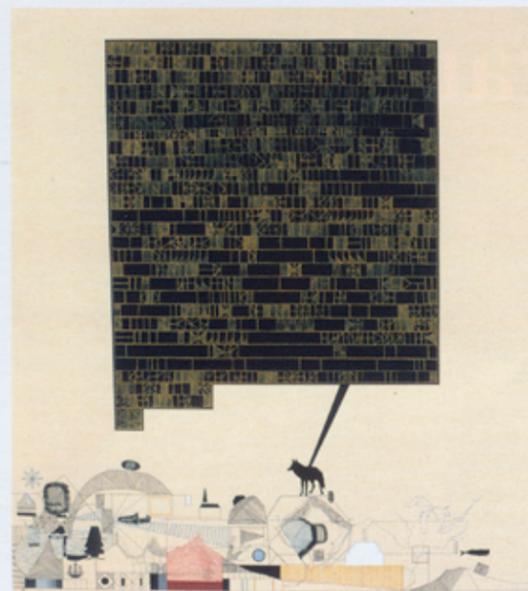
seen supporting each other. This is San Francisco's new bohemia, here in the Mission District.

The three storefronts are a community of businesses. Needles and Pens is a magazine shop specializing in underground zines and DIY productions; they also run a gallery program. The next shop is shared by Record Collector, a record store, KimoSciatic, a music label, and Woodward Flats, a screen-

printing press and gallery. On the end is Low, an art gallery directed by John Trippe, who also edits the popular art and culture website Fecal Face.

Fourteenth Street is a new scene for old faces. These places all opened within the last few

KEEGAN MCHARGUE, *Absurdist Art Collectors* (detail), 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 127 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery.



From left: SHAUN O'DELL, *The Transformers Continental Altitude Expansion Narrative*, 2004. Ink and gouache on paper, 66 x 58 cm. Courtesy of Jack Hanley Gallery; AMY RATHBONE, *Remembering winters and returning clippers (remix)*, 2005. Gouache, ink on paper, 46 x 61 cm. Courtesy of Gregory Lind Gallery. Photo: John White.

months, replacing some recent closures elsewhere. Keeping an exhibition space alive in any American city is an acrobatic feat, so it's no surprise how few make it here. The rents are astronomic, and this community is organized around a social scene, not a marketplace. What is surprising is how quickly the torch is picked up. Lately, when one space shuts its doors, two more spring forth in its place; the energy is indefatigable.

High rents also mean exhibition spaces are improvised. Shows are held in clothing stores like the recently closed Mimi Barr, furniture stores like The Drug Store, or bookstores like the renowned Adobe Books. Galleries are tacked on to studios, like Queen's Nails Annex, or opened in peoples' homes, like Triple Base, Hallway Bathroom and 667 Shotwell.

Many spaces bill themselves as 'experimental' simply because they don't have a market; the artists they show are trying their best to sell their work, or get noticed by a dealer. But 667 Shotwell is the real thing; director Chris Sollars manages to accomplish innovative programming while foregrounding truly experimental values. He invites artists from around the country to come to his home to make installations. It could be gimmicky, but his direction ensures that some real risk-taking occurs. A recent show, "Affirmation Juice" by Los Angeles artist Martin Durazo,

made use of the bathroom, refrigerator, and televisions. All of the work was realized in the week before the show. Toilet plungers were turned into instruments of eros, the bathtub was made a wishing well, everything was suffused with a hokey sort of spirituality that the artist was never quite making fun of. A final piece on the answering machine aroused a moment of frisson and turned a good show into a great one. On it we hear Durazo's doctor delivering the results of a recent STD screening: all clear.

Another layer of venues, the nonprofit galleries, supports the local scene. Many of these opened in the '60s and '70s and have steadily grown into large, professionalized spaces. New Langton Arts, Southern Exposure, The Lab and The Luggage Store are now a significant feature of the cultural landscape: bona fide institutions that support contemporary art. And new spaces like Pond and Mission 17 are following in their footsteps. Here, emerging artists are offered a chance to realize higher-stake projects. Unlike the major museums San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), these galleries are small enough to be flexible, and they respond to cultural trends quickly.

When the museums concern themselves with the local community, it makes careers bloom. As this article goes to print, the SFMOMA is closing its SECA

award show, which is given to two or four young artists of outstanding promise and entails an exhibition, catalogue, and cash prize; YBCA is opening "Bay Area Now 4," a triennial exhibition that surveys emerging artists of the area. Another important form of institutional support comes from the Headlands Center for the Arts, which sponsors residencies for artists based here and elsewhere.

In San Francisco, as anywhere, the differences between individual artists are broad, but interesting points lie in the threads that bind the diverse group together. All of these spaces nurture a community of young artists that functions like a cultural petri dish. With basically no money involved, artists are essentially working for, and off, each other. One person or another conceives, or validates, a new aesthetic, idea, or mode of working; if something is good its influence on other artists is soon visible. Observe, for example, the resonant effects of the careers of Bay Area artists like Barry McGee, Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen and others. Their influence has framed San Francisco's current folk-drawing explosion.

There are but a few galleries in town that are run on emerging talent, and competition for their attention is high among artists. These dealers keep a close eye on the petri dish, and when one of them connects with an artist's work, they may make it known

around the world. No gallery captures the San Francisco gestalt as neatly as Jack Hanley Gallery. Hanley, whose space at 15<sup>th</sup> and Valencia Streets is in the heart of the Mission, has a proven Midas touch for art. He's been in business for 15 years, and his early shows read like a shortlist of the most important artists of the past decade, including works by Christopher Wool, Christian Marclay, Sophie Calle, John Currin, Robert Gober, Richard Prince, Thomas Ruff, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jim Lambie, Catherine Opie and so on.

Now every name is recognizable, at the time none were. As these artists became more famous, they inevitably went to larger galleries in larger cities, but Hanley has remained focused on emerging talent, and one must surmise that these current young artists will be the names of the future. Hanley is now deeply involved with local artists; almost half of his shows feature them, and they're given much of the booth when he participates at Frieze, Art Basel, The Armory Show and other fairs, because it makes him unique — his is the only San Franciscan gallery at most of these important fairs.

Last year at Art Basel Miami Beach, for example, Hanley's Positions booth, which allowed the gallery to present only one artist, featured paintings and drawings by young local artist Keegan McHargue. McHargue's gypsy art