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ART: Looking back at an art-full year Walls coming down, art marching forward

By Josef Woodard

Perhaps the strangest moment in my frequent art venue haunting this past year occurred just a few weeks ago, when I grabbed hold of a hammer and punched a hole or three in the long wall of the hallowed McCormick Gallery. No, this was not a public performance art moment or prank, and no police, or even art police, were called to stop such flagrant vandalism. Rather, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's venerable gallery, site of countless fine shows over many decades, was the site of a raucous "wall breaking" (vs. "ground-breaking") event for visitors and members, a first step in an extensive overhaul and expansion of the Museum. Art remains alive and well and on the walls during the SBMA construction, being manifested in stages, and the present program includes two of the year's more impressive shows.

Color, design and cool, subversive conceptual wizbang are on display in the show "Geometry of the Absurd: Recent Paintings by Peter Halley," while the show "Looking In, Looking Out: Latin American Photography" touches us on multiple levels. A diverse and quietly dazzling gathering of Latin American photographs, brought out from the Museum's vaults, the show also gains importance as the swan song of locally and internationally significant curator Karen Sinsheimer, who passed away this year. She spent a quarter century at SBMA, while extending her influence widely, ushering in many a fine show and raising the bar of fine art photographic thinking and showcasing.

Other 2015 shows of note in our formidable art museum include "Botticelli, Titian, and Beyond: Masterpieces of Italian Painting from Glasgow Museums," zooming up to more recent history with the wonderfully quirky "The Paintings of Moholy-Nagy: The Shape of Things to Come," and my personal vote for "best small show" of the year, "Wandering the Negative: The Photographs of Herbert Bayer, 1929-1936."

Santa Barbara's other major, non-academia-tied artspace, Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB), continued its truly critical task of tending contemporary art matters in our town, with shows including Tam Van Tran, "Aikido Dream," "Then They Form Us," and "Teen Paranormal Romance."

Santa Barbara is also blessed with three strong and inviting art museum/gallery resources in the college campus triumvirate of UCSB, Westmont College and Santa Barbara City College.

UCSB's Art, Design & Architecture Museum's year was slower than usual, but boasted the strong shows "Barton Myers: Works of Architecture and Urbanism," and "How to Make the Uni-verse Right."

The Westmont Art Museum - still the most exhilarating and go-to new art spaces in the area - celebrated five years in action, with shows ranging from antiquity ("Rembrandt and the Jews: the Berger Print Collection") to the burgeoning moment ("Saar, Serra, Surfs, and more, Thirty New Acquisitions in Contemporary Art" and Keith Puccinelli and Dane Goodman's deliciously zany and deep collaborative

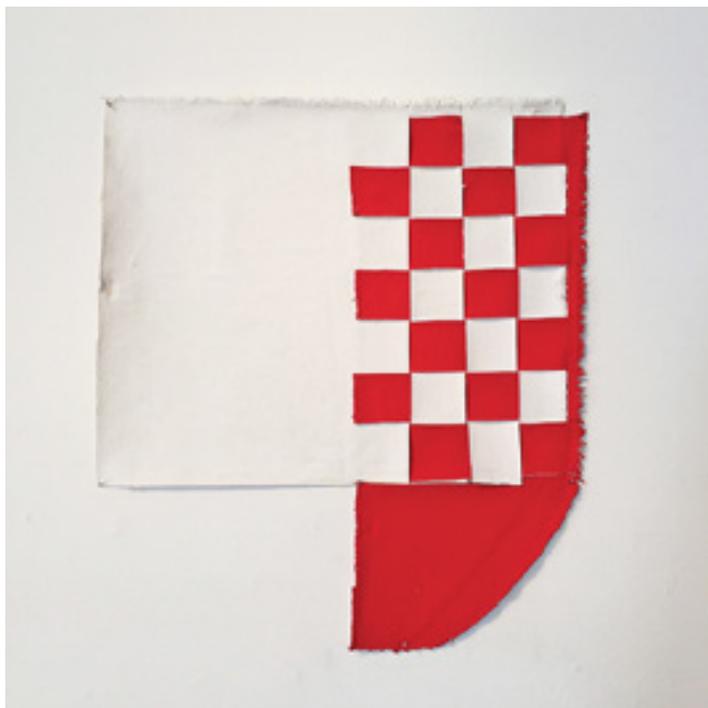


**"Murmuration" by David Hochbaum," FLOCK:
Birds on the Brink" - Photo courtesy Lotusland**

project “tug”).

SBCC’s Atkinson Gallery, formerly sequestered in a temp building during reconstruction, resumed its former glory in the city’s most view-endowed gallery, with an almost distractingly scenic view of the harbor below. But the art here, under the inspired guidance of gallery director Sarah Cunningham, kept our senses focused on indoor content, including the memorable shows by Maria Rendon, the Santa Barbara International Film Festival-timed film-inclusive installation “Valley of the Deer: Jillian McDonald,” and Richard Ross’ stunning and socially-conscious photography project “Isolated.”

Art is struggling, but hanging in, down in the Funk Zone, which still braves threats to become a haven for drunks and



**The Boat,” from Keith Puccinelli and Dane “Badge” by George Sanders
Goodmans collaborative project “tug,” “Unexpected Consequences”
Photo Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art Photo Courtesy Arts Fund Gallery**

developers. The anchor art spot there is still the Arts Fund Gallery, whose 2015 shows included the luminous and subtle “Unexpected Consequences,” “How I See It” and a juicily alternative-minded Sculpture Survey. A block away in the Zone, the intrepid photography gallerist Crista Dix’ wallspace gallery continues to keep alive the cause of intelligent and concept-driven fine art photography, which this year included a compelling Korean photography show, “Surveying the Landscape” and the idea/image-fueled “Bootsy Holler, Nuclear Family.”

In terms of venerable gallery spaces in town, in the heart of the tourist traffic and in the shadow of SBMA, Anapamu street boasts the Artamo Gallery, to one side of State, presenting a monthly series of art - mostly abstract - from out of town artists. On the other side is the spacious and considerable Sullivan Goss gallery, which downsized from its earlier two-site layout as an eatery/art-ery after 20 years, but continues to be a bold player on the art scene. Shows of note in 2015: “CA Cool,” “Summer Impressionism,” “Jean Swiggett: a One Man Renaissance” and a Fiesta-synced show, “Pinturas de la Fiesta.”

In the picturesque La Arcata - just down from the SBMA - the Waterhouse Gallery celebrated its 31st year in business. The gallery is run by Diane and gallerist/landscape painter Ralph Waterhouse, both of whom were also strongly involved in the ArtWalk at the Museum of Natural History. Nearby, Gallery 113 continues to be the home base gallery for the Santa Barbara Art Association, whose members frequently show at the downtown library’s central Faulkner gallery.

Up in north Santa Barbara County, the town of Solvang boasts two museums worth keeping tabs on. The Wildling Museum has established itself as a premiere nature-meets-art institution (two strong shows in 2015 were “Birds in Art” and “Wild Spirit: Horses in Art”). Across town, the Elverhoj Museum is charmingly Danish in architectural style and museum focus, along with its art shows. Highlights this past year included “Traditions on the Edge” and “Ro Snell: Inside Out.”

Other North County art outlets include the Alan Hancock College gallery and the Betteravia Center Gallery, hosting the re-

cent (and mildly controversial) “Love + Guts” show. Sex, art about sex, skateboarding and grassroots expression were among the topics abuzz in the show. Betteravia Gallery is the northern outpost curated by the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission, which also takes care of curatorial business in the downtown Channing Peake Gallery, in the government center, and which presented “Under the Influence: Responses to Place” and “Near and Far: Plein Air in County Parks.”

Incidental note: this was the retirement year for Rita Ferri, a longtime Arts Commission director and longtime Santa Barbara art scene keeper of the flame, at Contemporary Arts Forum and elsewhere in the 805. In a scene where flux is part of the landscape, Ms. Ferri was a pillar of continuity and creativity nurturer in town.

Other rewarding shows jumping out of the long list of art seen in the past year: “Jeanne Dentzel, Flowers: Seen & Unseen,” at the Santa Barbara Tennis Club (site of many an intriguing show), and Lori Wolf Grillias, “Emerging Pareidolia,” at the sweetly situated Architectural Foundation Gallery.

And my own “Best of” award for the year goes to a venue which is an enchanted spot on its own special terms, Lotusland, hosting one of its occasional art shows, “FLOCK: Birds on the Brink,” curated by Nancy Gifford. The theme here, of course, was the mythology and fragile life of birds (while the theme of the thrilling 2013 show at Lotusland was bees - i.e. “Swarm”) and the artists’ variations on said theme took (ahem) flight and chances, both in the transformed gallery spaces and in sitespecific places around the fabulist gardens of this magical real estate.