

At the de Young, a Rousing Showcase for Bay Area Artists

A call for art went out. Almost 8,000 pieces were submitted. The 883 chosen works make up a dizzying, bursting-at-the-seams extravaganza of an exhibition.

By Jori Finkel Photographs by Jim Wilson

Reporting from San Francisco

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One painting shows a too-sweet image of a Barbie face, a stream of honey oozing from a hole in her head. Nearby hangs a more detailed portrait of an Asian American woman with a pale complexion that appears to be cracking — shattering the stereotype of “porcelain” skin. Other artworks take images of American flags, or actual flags, and rework or reweave them. And a sculpture features Gen. Robert E. Lee in the form of a classic wooden toy, knocked flat on his back with sword limp at his side to evoke the way in which racial reckonings have toppled historical figures.

No, this is not the latest exhibition looking at competing visions of American identity today, though that's here, too. It's the second edition of the de Young Open, a sprawling exhibition of Bay Area artists at the de Young Museum where just about anything goes in terms of subject, style and medium. It's a dizzying, bursting-at-the-seams extravaganza of an exhibition, designed through an open call process to take the pulse of what local artists are thinking and making.



One of the eight galleries.

It's the kind of exhibition that would be relatively easy to host online: 7,766 artworks submitted, with 2,209 selected in the first round and 883 selected as finalists to be displayed. But along with creating a website for the show, the museum has also turned over its prime gallery space — home in the past to King Tut and Impressionist blockbusters — to showcase these artworks in a salon-style hang, nearly floor-to-ceiling across eight large galleries through Jan. 7.

“The de Young Open holds up a mirror to Bay Area artists and their concerns, whether their issues are immigration, Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, Jan. 6th and election deniers, or people who are unhoused,” said Timothy Anglin Burgard, the curator in charge of American Art there who originated the show in 2020. Beyond the socially or politically loaded artworks, which dominate the first gallery, there are plenty of realistic portraits and serene landscapes deeper in the show



The artist David Dugoncevic, right, holding his work “Don't Cry Now” and speaking to Jean Pettigrew Whelan.



Ms. Pettigrew Whelan checking her work “5'11 Stack #2” into the show.

Participants must reside in one of nine Bay Area counties, and this year they ranged in age from 18 to 86. Beyond that, Mr. Burgard said, “I don’t know and I don’t care to know how many artists were professionally trained. We’ve all known great artists who weren’t. Van Gogh wasn’t trained.”

He also didn’t know the artists’ names during the anonymous selection process — they were even scrubbed from the credits of video art submissions. Three artists chosen for the show this year turned out to be staff members at the museum: Ryan Butterfield, director of preparation and installation; Jill McLennan, a senior teaching artist; and Susan Doyle, a sales associate at the museum store. “Museums can be seen as exclusionary places for so many reasons, and legitimate reasons honestly,” said Stephanie Syjuco, an Oakland-based artist who served as a juror in the final round. “But the de Young Open is so democratic and inclusive — it’s like a love letter to the Bay Area.” This kind of open-call, juried exhibition has long been popular with community centers, schools and smaller museums. The model has a rich history in Europe going back to French “salon” exhibitions of the 17th century. The Paris salons grew so powerful by the 19th century that in 1863 the artists who didn’t make the cut, including greats like Courbet and Manet, took part in a show for the rejects, the important and also scandalous Salon des Refusés. (Some artists cut from the de Young Open held their own version last month in San Francisco, though more collegial and less shocking.)

The Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition, which has taken place annually in London since 1769, manages to keep this tradition alive. But in the United States, no major museum other than the de Young does an open call on such a large scale, perhaps because it goes against the grain of how museum professionals these days are trained. It’s an experiment that changes the role of curators from rather controlling gatekeepers to highly democratic door openers. And that means that some of the work is horribly — or wonderfully, depending on your point of view — out of touch with curatorial and market trends.

In the de Young Open 2023, over half the works are paintings, with photography and works on paper also well represented. Sculpture, not so much, and there’s little by way of ceramics, which is so popular on the international art circuit these days.

After the gallery with social and political works, Mr. Burgard organized a room on cities and urban life. Later sections focus on figurative work, Surrealist-inspired painting and abstraction, with colorful landscapes proving more popular here than they do, say, at Minnesota Street Project across town.



As part of the conservation process, Josephine Jenks vacuumed a work that was being accepted for admission into the show.



Installers with works that were to be placed on the walls.

For each gallery, the exhibition designers worked with Rhino 7 modeling software to arrange the works by size, smallest to largest at the top. Mr. Burgard then made tweaks for visual or thematic reasons, like bringing the Barbie portrait, “Sweet Thing,” by Arianna Tamaddon, and the “porcelain” Asian American portrait, “Chinoiserie,” by Jackie Liu, closer together.

An eight-person team of de Young curators, including Mr. Burgard, the museum’s contemporary art specialists, an African art specialist and a Native American art specialist, made the initial selection. The final grouping was made by four area artists: Ms. Syjuco, Clare Rojas, Sunny A. Smith and Xiaoze Xie.

Everyone involved worked from only digital images of the artworks, labeled with title and medium, which could make it tricky to understand an artist’s motivation, Ms. Syjuco said. “I had to take a leap of faith sometimes,” she said, describing some guesswork in the absence of a full series of works or an artist biography.

Overall, she was struck by the abundance of portraiture and also colors — “maybe this is a California thing, but the exuberance of the colors surprised me.”



Lifting a case over a display of sculpture at the show.

Mr. Burgard first presented the idea of doing a show on this model to his colleagues in 2019 as a way of celebrating the de Young's 125th anniversary and making the museum more accessible. The museum's director, Thomas Campbell, fast-tracked the idea during the pandemic, recognizing that many artists were struggling financially and that the museum could help encourage sales by providing contact information, without getting involved in transactions or taking a cut. (The Royal Academy takes a commission of 30 percent.)

"It felt like we were doing something for the city and artists in that dark period, a real boost for the institution and a boost for the community," Mr. Campbell said.

The show was closed for more than half of its nearly four-month run for Covid reasons, but it still generated strong word of mouth and sales. According to a museum survey, roughly a third of the artists made sales. Mr. Campbell himself bought a panoramic black-and-white drawing by Richard Ambrose of museum visitors gazing at masterpieces by the likes of Mark Rothko and Candida Höfer, or else looking out at the viewer.

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which comprises the de Young and its sister museum, the Legion of Honor, bought 16 works from the 2020 show, including Jocelyn Lee's riff on San Francisco real estate prices in the form of Monopoly cards and Sherwin Rio's delicate sculpture of boxing gloves, crafted from embroidered Filipino shirts.

This year's acquisitions so far include the Robert E. Lee sculpture, "Hollow," by James Shefik; a photographic nod to Botticelli by Stanislava Chening; and an experimental monotype by Kristina Nobleman.

The museum sales in particular can be a career booster. Last time around, one big discovery was the work of Rupy C. Tut. The Asian Art Museum acquired, through a donation, her 2019 painting "Machinery of Oppression." She is now represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery and has a solo show at the ICA San Francisco.



“Hollow,” by James Shefik, foreground, is a depiction of Gen. Robert E. Lee in the form of a classic wooden toy, knocked flat on his back with sword limp.

Ms. Silverman, who first saw Ms. Tut’s paintings at the de Young Open in 2020, remembers being “totally seduced” by the way she uses the techniques and materials of traditional Indian miniature painting to explore current issues, such as her own hybrid identity, motherhood and ecofeminism. As for the exhibition itself, the gallerist called it “so inclusive, it’s beautiful,” going on to praise the decision to group works by theme: “When you’re dealing with that much material, you have to put some boundaries around things.”

Mr. Campbell said the museum was committed to hosting the de Young Open every three years, even though it ties up the prime (read: moneymaking) gallery space. Mr. Burgard added, “It takes guts to take the exhibition space that had ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’ and King Tut, which we depend on to pay our staff, and then turn it over for this purpose.”

And museum leaders elsewhere are noticing, in a way that could lead to a New York counterpart at some point. Sharon Matt Atkins, the deputy director for art at the Brooklyn Museum, said she’s had conversations with de Young staff as well as her own about planning a similar community-based exhibition.

“We have a history here of highlighting and celebrating Brooklyn artists at the museum,” she said, mentioning the 2012 exhibition “Go,” which was essentially curated by the public. But that show was designed to introduce five artists.

“The number of artists the de Young has been able to present is really exciting,” she said. “We’re thinking about different ways we could build on their model, or different models internationally, to celebrate our creative community.”

Jori Finkel is a reporter who covers art from Los Angeles. She is also the West Coast contributing editor for The Art Newspaper and author of “It Speaks to Me: Art that Inspires Artists.” More about Jori Finkel

Jim Wilson is a Times staff photographer in San Francisco. More about Jim Wilson

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