

DATEBOOK

5 SECA artists at SFMOMA show the vivid present and promising future of Bay Area art

Tony Bravo | March 8, 2023



SECA Art Award recipients Maria A. Guzmán Capron (left), Gregory Rick, Marcel Pardo Ariza, Binta Ayofemi and Cathy Lu (on Zoom) chat during an interview in the 2022 SECA Art Award Exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in February

Since 1961, the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art has recognized emerging Bay Area artists making new and innovative work. Past winners of the biennial San Francisco Museum of Modern Art SECA Art Award include luminaries like Bruce Conner, Hung Liu, Barry McGee and Jim Campbell, among others whose names are now well-known to museumgoers.

It's an award that marks a significant moment in an artist's career, but also one that can herald great promise.

The latest SECA exhibition, which opened at the museum in December, reflects both the dazzling present of the selected artists and builds anticipation about work to come from awardees Binta Ayofemi of San Francisco and Oakland, Cathy Lu of Richmond, Marcel Pardo Ariza of Emeryville, and Oakland artists Gregory Rick and Maria A. Guzmán Capron.

Stretched over six galleries on SFMOMA's second floor, the five artists' work — spanning disciplines from site-specific performances, ceramics, photography and painting to video, textile, sculpture and more — is big in size and ambition. It transforms the environment and can run the viewer through an emotional gamut. There's

also an immediacy to the motifs that emerge across the individual shows: community, identity, what it means to occupy spaces and live with violence.



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, Mucho Más (Foreground), Eros (Background), And Luna (Background) From The Installation Respira Hondo, Sfmoma. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

It is a showing of art and artists that feels as diverse, idiosyncratic and thrilling as the Bay Area art scene itself.

SECA awardees are selected from a group of artists nominated by local curators, arts professionals and past winners. The nominees are invited to submit portfolios for consideration and from there, 16 finalists are chosen. After studio visits and project proposal assessments, winners are chosen. This year, artists were provided with a \$5,000 honorarium as well as \$10,000 in production funding and access to museum resources to create their shows.

Andrea Nitsche-Krupp, SFMOMA's assistant curator of media arts, said that in first organizing this year's exhibition, she didn't expect to find so many unifying themes, "yet when the work was installed ... some threads started to emerge."

"Each artist confronts some of the most traumatic, challenging aspects of humanity," said Nitsche-Krupp, who co-curated the show with assistant curator of contemporary art Jovanna Venegas, adding that the artists also seemed to aim at "putting forward a kind of reality that they want to see happen."

In a first, the exhibition is free to view through May 29, part of new SFMOMA director Christopher Bedford's spate of community-engagement initiatives that also underscores SECA's mission of building relationships between Bay Area artists and audiences.

In a recent interview and photo shoot at the exhibition, Ayofemi, Capron, Pardo Ariza and Rick came together in person to discuss the SECA experience, while Lu called in from Boston, where she is currently teaching at Tufts University.

Nitsche-Krupp said what she ultimately sees in the exhibition is “an optimism, and potential for the future that is so alive and present in each of these artists’ work. It makes me excited about art making in the Bay Area, and also optimistic about life coming out of a really challenging time.”

Maria A. Guzmán Capron: ‘Respira Hondo’



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Danza*, 2022. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

Maria A. Guzmán Capron was born in Milan. She received her master of fine arts from the California College of the Arts in 2015 and her bachelor of fine arts from the University of Houston in 2004. Her exhibitions in the Bay Area include a solo show at Premier Junior in San Francisco and group exhibitions at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, Berkeley Art Center and NIAD Art Center in Richmond.

Bodily forms and patchwork motifs often recur in her work, as do explorations of class, gender and awareness of a material hierarchy.



Seca Art Award Recipient Maria A. Guzmán Capron. Photo: Salgu Wissmath/The Chronicle

What's on view: "Respira Hondo" tells the story of a giantess descended from the ceiling whose presence turns the gallery into a colorful surreality. Among the plush sculptures covered in remnant and mass market fabrics are the giantess' foot, her two-sided face propped up by its long strands of hair — each eye with two pupils — and wall-mounted figures meant to reflect further ideas of duality.



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Mucho Más* (Foreground), *Danza* (Background), From The Installation *Respira Hondo*, Sfmoma. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

In the artist's words: "I was thinking more of an internal inner world and bringing that out to be exposed in some way. The giantess, Mucho Mas, she's coming from somewhere else, from the world above us, entering our reality, stepping into it. I wanted that step to be felt, to be three-dimensional and have weight. From what I hear, people seeing the show really make a connection with the bodily weight of it, the fabric and the size. It was about that and then having the other pieces kind of as pillars of this world in which Eros, Danza and Luna all had a job in some way. Eros to emanate love and care, Danza to bring in a sense of rhythm and joy, and Luna to keep track and to store time.

All of these elements come together in this soft panel of color to create an atmosphere, an experience more than just objects on the walls."



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, Mucho Más, From The Installation Respira Hondo, Sfmoma. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

On SECA: "I think of my practice as a continuous search to represent identities ... and for everyone that's being seen as other to find power in that otherness. This group has that diversity within it, and that's what makes me feel good and makes me feel comfortable to be in the spaces and galleries. I feel at home and I feel seen. I hope that all the people who come here can see themselves too within any of these spaces."

Binta Ayofemi: 'Continuum'



Binta Ayofemi, *Continuum*, 2022 (installation view, SFMOMA). Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

Binta Ayofemi grew up in Brooklyn and received her master of fine arts from Stanford University in 2007. Inspired by movements including the Black Panther Party, Black Shakers and Afrofuturism, her work includes performance, ensemble dance and music forming what she calls multisensory “urban scores.” They have been featured at the Oakland Museum of California, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum and the Berkeley Art Museum. She is also a recipient of the Public Artist Award in Oakland in 2020 and the YBCA 10 Artist Award in 2022.

Her practice frequently explores the impact of redlining and redevelopment on Black communities and how those spaces can be regenerated.

What’s on view: The spacial installation in the Floor 2 Learning Lounge seeks to “retune” the museum. Ayofemi considers the cities of Oakland and San Francisco her primary medium and canvas, frequently using abandoned and overlooked sites to honor Black and Indigenous presence.

“Continuum” uses materials including tinted mirrors and a corrugated metal wall, large blocks of wood and tree stumps, as well as a video installation mixing found and shot footage set to Alice Coltrane’s 1971 song “Journey in Satchidananda.”

In the artist’s words: “The big inspiration for me was this idea of the atmosphere or a portal, and what if the building would breathe? How can we actually acknowledge Black, Indigenous space and the fact that so many of these buildings in the South of Market area, these fortresses, are based on the parcel line, and the parcels that were created from redevelopment?”

I wanted to negotiate and transform some of the acknowledgment, and then the sense of breathing through that and ask: How could a building breathe were it to acknowledge all these things? I think that immersion is an act of radical imagination. What would it be like if certain notes, certain colors, certain presences that are unacknowledged would literally shift the building and resonate?”

On SECA: “The curators were amazing at delving into our practices and acknowledging how each of us are holding space. In the work that I’ve been doing, I’ve been playing with that idea. I felt like the galleries themselves show that each of us was holding space for a certain frequency or a certain imagination. It was a really profound experience to see everything come together.

This show, I don't think it's really finished yet. There's some other level of dialogue that is emerging out of this. I see our work as united in regards to a kind of invitation. It's an invitation to go deeper, to let our imaginations be their own language and to speak within that language."

Cathy Lu: 'Resurgence'



Cathy Lu, Resurgence, 2022 (installation view, SFMOMA); photo: Katherine Du Tiel

Cathy Lu was born and raised in Miami. She received her master of fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute after earning her bachelor of arts and bachelor of fine arts from Tufts University, where she currently teaches.

In the Bay Area, Lu has exhibited at Oakland's Johansson Projects and Aggregate Space as well as San Francisco's Jessica Silverman Gallery and the [Chinese Culture Center San Francisco](#).

In 2020, she won an Emerging Artist Fellowship from the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts and was an Asian Cultural Council/ Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation Fellow in 2019. She was also an artist in residence locally at Root Division and Recology San Francisco, Bemis Center for the Arts in Omaha, Neb., and the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Mont.

Lu frequently examines elements of Chinese and Asian American culture in her practice.

What's on view: Lu's hanging ceramic installation "Resurgence" is inspired by the Chinese creation goddess Nüwa. The work extends throughout the gallery like a spiderweb or veins in the human body and contains hundreds of individual ceramic parts forming garlands. Among the objects represented in the garlands are corner-store fruits and long-nailed hands that feel ready to grab the viewer. Against the vibrant orange wall, Lu's earth-toned installation is another exploration by the artist into cultural assumptions about Chinese symbols and Asian American identity.

In the artist's words: "All of us (SECA winners) probably had the experience of not having an educator that was from our community, or even being introduced to artists that were. I know I wanted to talk about it, but it's just never something we ever talked about. When you do bring up identities or experiences of being Asian American, it was kind of looked down upon as not being 'conceptual' enough.

In approaching this installation, I think we all just really wanted to build a new world, and that's really how I thought about it, too. With my piece specifically, with Nüwa being the creator of people, she made the world

also, in a sense. I think I could see in each of our spaces the way we wanted to reshape the world to not perpetuate the erasure of our history that we all experienced.”

On SECA: “With this experience, I feel like my own practice has become more confident. Before, I had so much more self-doubt, but I felt like this opportunity allowed me to access a certain power I didn’t know I had. It made me think of the TV show ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ and how there’s a portal to hell under their high school, but ours is a portal to the future, to how things can be better. I just feel so much power emanating from everyone’s work.”

Marcel Pardo Ariza: ‘I Am Very Lucky, Very Lucky to Be Trans’



Marcel Pardo Ariza, *I am Very Lucky to Be Trans*, From The Installation *Respira Hondo*, Sfmoma. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

Pardo Ariza was born in Bogota, Colombia, and received their master of fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2016 and their bachelor of arts from Earlham College in Richmond, Ind.

In the Bay Area, their work has been exhibited at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, the Palo Alto Art Center and the Institute of Contemporary Art San Jose.

Pardo Ariza is the co-founder of Art Handlxrs, an organization that supports queer, BIPOC, trans and nonbinary people and women in professional arts industry support roles. They are also the recipient of the 2021 CAC Established Artists Award, the 2020 San Francisco Artadia Award and the 2017 Tosa Studio Award, among others.

Pardo Ariza’s practice frequently focuses on photography, queer identity, intergenerational connections and community collaborations.

What’s on view: “I Am Very Lucky, Very Lucky to Be Trans” is centered around an altar-like photo wall featuring portraits of leaders in the Bay Area transgender community including [Honey Mahogany](#), Donna Persona, Jupiter Perara, Tina Aguirre and Aubrey Davis, as well as accompanying audio and video of the subjects.

The use of color blocking behind the portraits brings to mind Buddhist shrines, the grand architecture of cathedrals and the exuberance of queer clubs. A bench in the gallery is designed with the same color blocking.

The vertical arrangement of the photos suggests the artist is presenting a chosen family tree, a concept that is especially moving when you hear the stories of survival by the featured participants who share their journey finding community in the narratives.

In the artist's words: "White walls in galleries are a relatively recent thing, and I think that there's so much power in reimagining how something (we take for granted) could look — especially with photography. There's so many rigid rules about how things should be framed, how things should be handled and what height this (photo) should be hung. When you're starting to think about something like accessibility in different ways, that becomes oppressive.

I was also really interested in changing the lighting — inviting a little bit of club lighting, soft pink lighting — and then also having the music be something that was activated. Galleries for me are so silent, but I know that some people come and it feels sacred, healing, kind of like a religious situation. For me there's something really powerful about entering a space full of music and talking. I wanted the photos to take up space, but also the voices of folks to be in the space as well.

Furniture is also part of accessibility, and makes it even more immersive. I want you to feel like you have the right to be there for longer than a few seconds."

On SECA: "I felt like there was a collective Black and brown energy (with the SECA group) that was ready to fill up space, and I loved that about this show. In the history of SECA, we haven't really seen that. I'm so excited that this continues, and it will hopefully invite other artists to make powerful work."

Gregory Rick: Various paintings



Gregory Rick, *Ain't it a blessing*, 2022 (left); *Charlottesville*, 2022 (right) (installation view, SFMOMA). Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

Gregory Rick grew up in South Minneapolis. He received his bachelor of fine arts from California College of the Arts in 2019 and his master of fine arts from Stanford University in 2022.

In the Bay Area, his work has been exhibited in San Francisco at California College of the Arts, Bass and Reiner Gallery, Ever Gold Gallery, and Slash.

Rick has won the Yamaguchi printmaking award, the Nathan Oliveira fellowship, and the Jack K. and Gertrude Murphy Award. Rick also served in the 101st Airborne in Iraq and received the Combat Infantry Badge. After his enlistment was up, Rick was mostly unhoused between 2007 and 2012.

His large-scale paintings frequently address themes of racial conflict, battle, protest and systemic injustices.

What's on view: Rick's nine paintings, shown over two galleries, use a variety of media (acrylic, wax pastel, enamel, oil stick, felt-tip pen) and depict both real-world events like the 1992 Los Angeles riots and 2017 Charlottesville, Va., Unite the Right rally, as well as larger societal issues like mass incarceration. The works on view are at times frantic in their activity, anxiety-inducing in their crowded compositions (at times resembling 20th century Mexican political murals) and ultimately powerful in what they confront. Each work offers a deeply felt narrative you can easily become absorbed in, trying to decode the many figures and elements.

In the artist's words: "I wanted to have each one of these paintings or narratives be a chapter. I had it starting out with thinking about my life as my autobiography, and in what ways does that connect to larger themes? That was the guiding force. I feel like they gave me the space for the rhythm of the paintings to work and to be able to step into the paintings. In my work, I tell stories.

"To me, the show being free is huge. I think of being in Minneapolis and being homeless and going to the Minneapolis Institute of Art because it was free and I could always sit there. I think that was my first link, my first conversation with painters from the past. I would sit in front of Max Beckmann paintings, and nobody would mess with me. I was just another person in the gallery."

On SECA: "Things are very charged, and things are coming to a head. A lot of concerns are being raised, and a lot of historic injustices are being stood up to (in the art world). We also just came out of the pandemic and I feel like all these things that are happening also connect us (artists), and we're connected through our practices. I think we'll be the kind of friends where maybe we haven't seen each other in a while but when we do, we can jump right in where we left off. (SECA) is a unique experience to go through with these other people."