



Review

Recology SF Artist in Residence Exhibitions

By Jennifer Stager *February 9, 2016*

In an archaeological excavation, dump layers can yield incredible, museum-worthy treasures, but removed from their intended context, these objects often resist interpretation. Finding meaning in trash, however, is not only the purview of archaeologists. Friday night I took a dark road at the southeastern edge of the city that leads toward the Recology Facility. I'd just left the sparkling crush of people in the center of the city at the opening of *Bring It Home: (Re)locating Cultural Legacy Through the Body*, the inaugural show at the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries (SFAC), in which Jeremiah Barber's slightly sunken white and gray cast of his own vulnerable body lay on a plinth, reminiscent of corpses preserved at Pompeii. At the end of the dark road, just inside the Recology warehouse, stood the real Jeremiah Barber, surrounded by a lively crowd at this season's Artist in Residence opening. AIR gives two working artists and one student artist four months of space and tools at the recycling wing of Recology; this quarter the three artists are Jeremiah Barber, Alison Pebworth, and Robb Godshaw.

Make Me Change Me, Barber's show, occupies the first room of the exhibition space. Although the sculptures, videos, installations, and photographs on view differ in appearance from his SFAC sculpture, both concern themselves thematically with the scrutiny of bodies. Often Barber offers up his own body for close attention; at other times he forces the beholder to confront oneself.

The sculpture *Survey* (all works 2015-16) is composed of parabolic and cosmetic mirrors and a lamp on a custom stand. Leaning down to peer at the glass, I am confronted by the reflection of my own eye looking back at me. Just as when you look into the eye of another and see your own face reflected in their pupil, so here do you see your own eye at *Survey's* center. Rather than a surface, a pupil is a hole at the center of the eye through which light strikes the retina, and *Survey's* telescopic shape forms a similar pathway. Seeing and being seen depend on internal mechanisms, but we experience them on the surface of another's eye. With his focus on optics and reflection, Barber shows us the inescapable presence of the self in the act of looking.

We Always Progress features the writer Ingrid Rojas Contreras, the artist's wife and frequent collaborator, doubled and standing within a capsule. It is one of four three-minute videos projected onto two large screens positioned to form a corner. Although the capsule shares the retro-futurist look of many objects in the exhibition, Barber constructed it by removing the shelves from a display case for small objects, raising it onto wheels, and adding fluorescent lights. As in all the works on view, the materials are exclusively items thrown away by San Francisco residents. Contreras recites words from notes found by Barber that he at first thought were written by an analyst helping a client through a regression, but later discovered were jottings on Brian Weiss's best-selling *Many Lives, Many Masters*. The two versions of Contreras speak about the imagined regression; one of her forms takes the role of the analyst and the other of client.

"Do you remember all of your lives?" she asks.

"I will, when it is important for me to remember," she answers.

While *Survey* forces an intersubjective exchange between the beholder and themselves, *We Always Progress* externalizes the sort of internal dialogues that Barber's show provokes. The directive of the exhibition title—*Make Me Change Me*—encapsulates its impact. Barber made and changed these materials into objects, which in turn act on their beholders, (re)making and changing us as we interact with them and through them.

Just one room over, the visual field shifts dramatically with Alison Pebworth's show, *Innards and Upwards, A San Francisco Wunderkammer*. If light and reflection dominate in *Make Me Change Me*, here colors, gilt, and curvilinear lines take the stage. In *Autobiography, 1964–Present*, Pebworth installed a library of discarded books on a vintage wheelchair with parasol attachments covered in gold leaf. She selected significant books whose publication dates align with each year of her life, including *The Gay Cookbook*, *Women's Mysteries*, *The Power of Feminist Art*, and *Infinite City* (to which Pebworth contributed). Her library traces influences woven into her life and work, while indexing each year.

Covering one full wall is a sleek black sculpture of discarded wood fragments fitted together to create a work that resembles an antique furniture piece with differently sized cabinets and drawers, each containing a colorful, fantastical scene or object: *Innards and Upwards: A San Francisco Wunderkammer*. A *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, is a Renaissance precursor to the modern museum. Each cabinet and drawer contains sculptures and collections created by Pebworth from materials that San Franciscans threw away. An elegant portrait of a horse occupies one cabinet, a red goldfish another, and yet another includes an assemblage of blue and yellow foam curlers and vintage wig clippings, while a collection of pine cones is laid out elsewhere. The central cabinet opens to reveal beady-eyed minks, some curled around each other at the bottom of the cabinet, others stretched along the cabinet walls, their noses pointed toward a square cabinet above, which contains a gilded flower with the word *yes!* at its center. Attendants open a subset of the cabinets at different times, controlling at Pebworth's direction how much and what is on

view. The black matte exterior frames and relieves the rich, material color of the contents. Pebworth and Barber both described contending with the overwhelming volume of recycled materials at the facility. Pebworth built her editing process into the beholder's experience. Her *Wunderkammer* foregrounds selected viewing, and the cabinet itself offers her particular edition of the city—a vibrant, wondrous, and curious combination of parts.

A stunning installation, *Biodegradient*, occupies the back third of Godshaw's space. Two modified "voxbox" hologram-viewing boxes project a slowly moving spectrum across an assemblage of white Styrofoam forms. The rainbow traces over the bleached forms, washing them briefly with color, before leaving behind an ongoing expanse of white. The spectrum, or rainbow, is the ultimate bridge between perception and materiality; color is at once something produced through light and experienced through materials. If the reflected eye returning your gaze in Barber's *Survey* renders the mechanics of beholding visible, and Pebworth's *Wunderkammer* externalizes looking as an act of selection, Godshaw's *Biodegradient* mediates between perception and material experience.

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Recology San Francisco Artist in Residence Exhibitions is on view at Recology Art Studio, in San Francisco, through January 22, 2016.

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