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San Francisco Days

by Abraham Orden



[Former supervisor Matt Gonzalez in front of Barry McGee's installation.](#)

[Photo by Alan Bamberger, artbusiness.com](#)



[Barry McGee with one of his drawings at City Hall.](#)



[Josh Lazcano's video installation at City Hall.](#)

Hard-boiled journalists intimidate me; I never talk shop when I meet them. So imagine my delight at being asked into the hallowed passages of City Hall one afternoon to meet San Francisco supervisor and unsuccessful mayoral candidate **Matt Gonzalez**, a genuine Green Party political celebrity who also happens to be a fan of avant-garde art. With secret satisfaction masked in aplomb, I wandered alone into the depths of the city's bureaucracy, pad in hand, pen behind ear, worldly facial expression in place.

When I found his office, Gonzalez invited me into the inner chamber (not too shabby) and opened a bottle of wine. He talked to me like I was a real reporter, and I duly took notes like one.

"The maintenance guys give us a hell of a time over this stuff," said Gonzalez with a sweeping gesture. He's been showing art in this office for his entire term of four years, opening to the public the first Friday night of every month.

On the wall the words "SMASH THE STATE" were spray painted in bright orange, by the hand of **Barry McGee** no less; this message was accompanied by dozens of doodles by other hands, tags applied during the opening, public-restroom style. On another wall, McGee had installed a suite of his signature bright patterned paintings and ballpoint pen portraits of hairy men. Opposite was **Josh Lazcano's** piece, a quintet of video monitors playing footage of Latino gangs throughout the Americas. They laughingly brandish tattoos and weapons, and occasionally beat the crap out of each other. Above each monitor hung a well-worn bomber jacket of a different color.

Though McGee and Gonzalez had never met before the show, they were kindred spirits by reputation. Joined at the point where the Green Party meets Graffiti art, both have risen to fame via their grassroots progressive stance.

"I think Barry feels deeply uncomfortable with the amount of attention his work gets -- the prices it sells for -- when so many of his friends remain poor. I think that's kept him humble, and made him very giving," said Gonzalez of McGee.

Kate Shepherd at Anthony Meier Fine Arts

By the time I got to **Anthony Meier Fine Arts** I was back in my element. Meier relocated his gallery last year into a stately mansion designed by **William Jefferson Polk** and built in 1911. On view



[Kate Shepherd](#)
[Clay Steps to Sea and Striped Sky](#)
2004
[Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#)



[Kate Shepherd](#)
[Moonlight Stairs to Purple Sea](#)
2004
[Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#)



[SFMoMA curatorial associate Tara McDowell](#)



[SECA Art Award-winner Rosana Castrillo Díaz \(left\) with SFMoMA curator Janet Bishop](#)

during my visit were works by painter **Kate Shepherd**.

Shepherd's mature work emerged in the mid-1990s. Since 1995 she's had a solo show every year; her last in San Francisco was in 1999, also with Meier. Shepherd is known for her sensitivity -- with line and color, weight and space. Her new works don't break stride, though there is some personal innovation going on here.

This is the first time Shepherd has taken a palette (in this case dominated by blues and a powerful maroon) to multiple paintings. We can imagine the load that puts to bear on a painter of such discrimination, whose work is so finely tuned.

The gallery's main room is dominated by three large paintings, each comprised of several panels butted together in signature style. Surfaces are either flat planes of color or they are patterned with polygons receding into the distance. They depict geometricized exteriors whose titles leave little ambiguity as to their inspiration: *Sea and Sky (White Boat)* and *Tall Sea, Cliff* (all works 2004).

Don't over-think these paintings -- to do so is to pass over the softer, more radiant physical experience of them. The three big works are hung low to the floor and present a unified horizon. They materialize the viewer's body like a **Barnett Newman** zip, only instead of feeling diminutive, we feel tall and graceful. There is something Mediterranean in all that blue, and leaving the room I felt calmer than I had entering. For those who want to take a piece of the action home but can't afford the wall space or the \$15,000 plus price tags, there are smaller paintings and a few beautiful drawings available, starting at \$2,500.

SECA Awards at SFMoMA

The **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** recently opened its "2004 SECA Art Award" exhibition, Jan. 22-May 15, 2005, a show of works by Rosana Castrillo Díaz, Simon Evans, Shaun O'Dell and Josephine Taylor. SECA -- the **Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art** -- is a group of patrons and who tour the city's studios with SFMoMA curators **Janet Bishop** and **Tara McDowell**, picking the best and the brightest from the city's hosts of young artists.

One cynic joked that "the SECA is a great opportunity to show your work to tourists," but generally the exhibition is seen as providing a real opportunity for the artists, and one of the only events of the year in which the museum rolls up its sleeves and digs in to its own city.

These days drawing is big in San Francisco, and all four artists work primarily on paper. The exception to that rule greets visitors as they arrive at the head of the stairs to view the show. **Rosana Castrillo Díaz's** "tape drawing" is a mammoth ghost that one could almost pass by. Composed of small rings of scotch tape, it spans 30 feet by eight and hangs suspended just in front of the wall. Finding it, then rapidly realizing its size, is a surprising thrill, like swimming into a school of silvery little fish. In a further touch of brilliance, the lights are kept low. The piece is so delicate that it disappears before our eyes, only to reappear on the crest of a current of air.

If Castrillo Diaz whispers, British-born **Simon Evans** absolutely



Rosana Castrillo Díaz
Untitled
2004

ventilates. When I was visiting, the museum was packed. Three 12-year-olds were bouncing around Evans' drawings, excitedly reading the texts aloud. They coalesced at one and got quiet. "This guy's a genius," ventured one, soliciting his friends' approval. I glanced to see what had so caught them. Ah yes, a work titled, *Women I'd Fuck in Time* (2004).

The drawing features one of Evans' stock-in-trade themes: the group portrait. Others include maps, charts, lists and diagrams of all sorts. Rarely does an element of an Evans drawing go unlabeled. Every shape, line and collage element bears a line of explanation.



Simon Evans
Diagram of an Interaction with a
Different Body/Yellow Concerns
2004

Text, information art, is such thin ice that it's invigorating to see someone brave it. These are compositionally unique -- a surface of layered scotch tape (again) worked with pen, Wite-Out and pieces of this and that. Visually they have a certain unschooled grace; it plays well against the text.

He has said *Gulliver's Travels* largely inspired his drawing; there is something of the 19th-century humorist (as well as the late and much beloved mail artist **Ray Johnson**) in this fanciful worldview. In pieces like *Inventory*, 2004, he attaches a group of small bits of things, almost pocket lint, to the page and riffs off them -- a small square of silver cloth is called "An old-fashioned Idea of the Future," a piece of cardboard is "a book on Egypt." It's surely satire; at times the humor is a little forced, a little too BBC. Things are best when there is an element of personal disclosure, as in *All that's Wrong with Sex* (2003), a list that starts with "Death and Babies"



Artist Keegan McHargue (left) with
Simon Evans in front of Evans'
Untitled, 2004

My blue ribbon goes to **Josephine Taylor**, whose four huge paintings on paper occupy the adjacent gallery. What impresses about Taylor is how frank she is. Her work is about traumas great and small, and comes directly from her own life experiences. As an idea, it's so unfashionable that we must love it.



Josephine Taylor
All Clowns Go to Heaven
2004

Even better, the painting, in gouache, displays true talent. It's easy to commit to a Taylor drawing, perhaps because they are so large that the abundant empty space envelopes us. Once taken in, we find a space weird and mournful as a dream. In *All Clowns Go to Heaven* (2004), a man lies splayed across the midsection of the paper, with two other figures at his feet that appear more distant. His arms and legs weakly protrude from his toga, so thin they make him look froglike. He stares out to us and clutches the tassel of a hanging



[Josephine Taylor in front of her drawing, *We all have our weaknesses \(and those who look out for us\)* \(2005\)](#)

piata to his chest in the international symbol for "I think I'm having a heart attack!"

Taylor handles the expression of the human face like no other. In this poor guy it's emotive and precise, but not like an Old Master; it's more akin to a great photographer. A moment is captured in which several trajectories of feeling are vibrating through the subject; this man on the death's door looks positively mammalian; he looks wearily frightened but ultimately resigned. The woman at the far left is wailing and holding on to a man looking somewhat lost in a blindfold. Fully grown, he has the posturing of a confused child being mothered, though the elegant tear stains on his cheeks show he's not completely oblivious.

The last gallery features works by **Shaun O'Dell**, who has garnered much fame in the Bay Area and is beginning to be more widely known. The Stanford MFA is part of the **Jack Hanley Gallery** crowd (as is Evans), and was one of the gallery's most popular solo shows last year.



[Shaun O'Dell
Leave the Capital \(detail\)
2004
collection of James Harris Gallery,
Seattle](#)

The enthusiasm for his work here is attested by the hordes of imitators populating the Mission District's studios. O'Dell works in San Francisco's style of choice -- folksy. His ink drawings well up from the depths of America's pioneer mythology, blending indigenous patterning in line with repeating icons from American history, the pilgrim, the Liberty Bell, the deer. Occasionally, something as historically remote as a mastodon will enter the mix, widening the images historical loop and broadening our interpretation. O'Dell doesn't proselytize like we might expect; happily the images do more probing than preaching.

San Francisco International Art Exposition

I had heard the fluttering rumors that veteran fair organizer **Thomas Blackman** was canceling the **San Francisco International Art Exposition** after things had gone poorly at **Art Chicago** last year, but the situation really looked most grim when, three weeks before the fair, I tried to get my press pass and found the website closed down - - someone had neglected to pay the bill.

The site came back up and the fair carried on, but pickings were thin. For the serious collector of contemporary art, SFIAE had only a couple of anchor points: **Forum Gallery** of both New York and Los Angeles was showing two **David Mach** animal heads (*Brown Bear*, \$15,000, and *Golden Rhino*, \$25,000) made entirely of matchsticks, and a big **Odd Nerdrum** painting titled *Flock* (\$325,000).

Anthony Meier had his usual strong lineup: small works from **Tam Van Tran**, Kate Shepherd, **Ed Ruscha** and **Gerhard Richter**, and a big, beautiful drawing of the night sky by **Dave Muller**, which is sold piecemeal for \$5,500 for a few panels.

The usually reserved **John Berggruen Gallery** had a selection of photographs from **Timothy Greenfield-Sanders'** new series, "XXX: 30 Porn Star Portraits," which garnered so much attention at **Mary Boone Gallery** in New York last year.

At this fair, one would do better buying prints. **Charles Cowles Gallery** brought from New York exceptional prints by **Robert Yoder**



[Jack Hanley \(left\) and Shaun O'Dell](#)



[David Mach's *Brown Bear* and *Golden Rhino* at Forum Gallery](#)



[At SFIAE 2005, dealer Anthony Meier \(right\) with Ann Hatch and her husband Paul Discoe, and gallery staffers Rebecca Camacho \(seated left\) and Sarah Granatir](#)



[Ratio 3 owner Chris Perez listening to Marcel Dzama's *The Albatross Notes* at the SFIAE](#)

(\$750). San Francisco's **Arion Press** had a set of framed **Sol LeWitt** prints that had been made to illustrate a book of **Seamus Heany** poems. **Trillium Press** of Brisbane, Ca., unveiled a great new edition of **Marcel Dzama** prints. Titled *Cabin of Count Dracula*, the set includes 20 prints and comes in a fur-lined log-cabin-style box that also includes a cool green vinyl record of Dzama's band, *The Albatross Notes* (\$8,000). The press promises more collectable sets like this to follow.

Business at the fair seemed so slow that some of the out-of-town dealers were seen gallery-hopping on Saturday, the second day of the fair. When I asked how sales were going most gave a brave smile and said, "Fine!" but wandering around on the third day, the red dots were few and far between.

ABRAHAM ORDEN writes on art from San Francisco.

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