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Class not dismissed, part 3: The museum is the message

New exhibitions at MOPA and MCASD
demonstrate the importance of representation

by Rachel Michelle Fernandes



Image courtesy of the artist

Famed media historian and philosopher Marshall McLuhan is perhaps best known for coining the phrase “the medium is the message.” When it comes to arts education, museums and their curatorial staff have the ability to send powerful messages to attendees, especially young people, through the artists they choose to include in their hallowed halls.

“It is hard for me to recall seeing a Black person represented in a museum or contemporary space as a young person,” reflects artist Erica Deeman, whose two richly nuanced and sophisticated photo series *Silhouettes* and *Brown* are set to open at the Museum of Photographic Arts as part of its “Artist Speaks” on April 27. “I reflect back upon this and wonder upon the impact for me personally. I think one of the reasons I make the work I do is to address this absence.”

Representation matters. This philosophy is something that artist-run spaces and universities often embrace, but unlike these small-scale and academic spaces, most museums—especially in San Diego—sit in heavily trafficked areas. Their locality gives them the ability to draw in a bigger and more diverse crowd. There's also the level of legitimacy and esteem given to work presented in a museum setting. And then there's the resources most museums dedicate to their educational programs, resources smaller spots usually lack.

In other words, museums have the ability to make a big impact, an ability some seem to take for granted or misuse. Fortunately, museums such as Museum of Photographic Arts and Museum of Contemporary Arts San Diego are demonstrating what is hopefully a new dawn in curatorial decisions and programming citywide. Larger institutions are seizing this moment of cultural reckoning in our national history as an opportunity to expand the conversation about what constitutes *museum worthy* contemporary art.

“If we're going to be in service to our community and be a place where the community comes to learn and understand art, we want to make sure that we connect to the realities of our visitors and that we're representing a spectrum of perspectives,” says Joaquin Ortiz, MOPA's director of innovation.

MOPA is one of the rare San Diego institutions leading the charge when it comes to both diverse programming and questioning methods of representation with series such as “Artist Speaks,” which features a video installation of the artist explaining the work.

“Based on research we've been doing with our audiences in the last couple of years, we've found that, even though they understand the importance and role of museums and curators, they most want to hear directly from the artist,” Ortiz says.

For Deeman's incarnation of “Artist Speaks,” both of her photo series feature large-scale portraits of Black men and women, using traditional mediums to question what it means to be seen as a person

of color in America.

“With *Silhouettes* and *Brown* my desire is to elevate the African Diaspora and to subvert historical representations and stereotype,” says Deeman. “I am searching for the individual and in many ways I am searching for myself.”

Deeman, who is originally from the UK, also said that the shift in the way she is seen and perceives being seen in America versus overseas is a drastic one, influencing her decision to make this body of work.

“When you have a show with this kind of sensitive topical nature, it’s very helpful to have the artist speaking directly towards their work so that they can pass that information directly onto the visitor,” adds Ortiz.

Meanwhile, at MCASD, curators Anthony Graham and Jill Dawsey are also working hard to represent a variety of perspectives and artistic styles through the lens of contemporary art.

Two of the museum’s exhibits, both opening this Thursday, April 19, by current contemporary artists Yve Laris Cohen and Sadie Barnette, couldn’t be more different stylistically, at least on the surface.

Barnette’s exhibit mixes an ’80s hip hop aesthetic of her childhood with family photos and pages from the FBI file on her father’s involvement with the Black Panthers (see more on page 9). Laris Cohen’s work involves, as Dawsey describes it, an “institutional critique, minimalist sculpture, ballet. These are ways that we can historically kind of signify some the larger parameters of (his) work practice.”

Still, both shows represent a willingness by the museum to make connections between the personal and the political. While Barnette’s exhibit is touring—bringing her personal, deeply political history and own artifacts to the public—Laris Cohen’s exhibit is putting the whole notion of “fitting in” to a museum on its head, going so far as to literally claim and reconstruct portions of the MCASD’s recently

demolished Sherwood Auditorium performance space. By closely collaborating with Dawsey and former Sherwood events technician Michael Scheer, Laris Cohen constructs a nuanced personal narrative which subtly points to his own complicated relationship with his body and gender while also critiquing expectations of artists and performers within institutions.

“We’re showing artists of different backgrounds, at different stages, with different interests,” says Graham, “asking ourselves, how do we show a sculptural installation from 1971 alongside two artists’ projects from this year? We try to provide a full picture—as best we can—of what contemporary art can be.”

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