

SOUTHERN  
EXPOSURE

# EAST BAY EXPRESS

## The Most Inspiring Art in Oakland and the East Bay in 2016

By Sarah Burke  
December 20, 2016



Digital video stills "Mammy, Mammy #1" and "Mammy, Mammy #2" by Yetunde Olagbaju.

The Ghost Ship tragedy made at least one thing clear: The East Bay art scene is vaster than most people realize. Like water, it seeps into any available crevice, forming a web of streams that would be impossible to map. But, undoubtedly, it all connects.

The artwork on this year-end list is diverse. There are museum shows that featured works made by activists in their bedrooms and underground headquarters, conceptual installation-art collaborations with San Quentin inmates and professional piñata crafters, and even the venues vary, from the Oakland Museum of California to a neighboring Chinatown loft, which provides space for art at the intersection of queerness and new media.

I can't pretend that I saw every art show in the East Bay this year, but I did my best, and these are the ones that I remember most. And, while they all differ greatly in content, form, and intention, they have one thing in common: incredible ambition. During such a politically discouraging year, and amid a broader climate of scarcity in the arts, instead of scaling back, these artists and arts institutions managed to actualize projects against all odds.

Here's my top-ten list of most memorable and inspiring art shows and projects of 2016, in chronological order.

## A Commitment to New Media

### *Emergent Media Lab series*

B4bel4b Gallery is the only venue in the East Bay that's seriously and consistently committed to showcasing new-media artwork. With its Emergent Media Lab series, founded by B4bel4b director Tiare Ribeaux in collaboration with artists Morehshin Allahyari and Andrew Blanton, the gallery presented thought-provoking shows all year that took up questions of identity, materiality, and labor in relationship to the internet. From January's *Archive Fever*, exploring how digitally enabled modes of archiving affect the cultural significance of artifacts, to this month's *Side Gig*, questioning the true cost of the sharing economy, each show has been at the forefront of the practical and philosophical conversation about our relationship to technology.

## People In Your Neighborhood

### *222 Forgotten Cities: The Power of Melanin*

This year, Brittani Sensabaugh became one of the most talked-about artists in the Bay Area.

A few years ago, the young artist left her life as a fashion photographer in New York City to document the deep East Oakland neighborhood where she grew up. That series captured the elaborately braided heads of young girls and the wells of wisdom inside old men's eyes with a rare sense of authenticity, which Sensabaugh achieved by hearing her subject's life stories before taking their photographs. Next, Sensabaugh did the same in Brownsville (New York), Houston, Baltimore, Watts (Los Angeles), Philadelphia, and New Orleans. The result was *222 Forgotten Cities: The Power of Melanin*, a striking showcase of Sensabaugh's work, which exhibited at the Betti Ono Gallery in February.

## Art Plus Activism

### *Take This Hammer: Art + Media Activism from the Bay Area*

With *Take This Hammer*, Oakland curator Christian L. Frock infiltrated San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts with the artistic artifacts of activism. In one room, walls bore stencil portraits depicting victims of police violence by Oakland's Oree Originol. In another, ephemera in the form of yoga balls and jester jump suits commemorated Leslie Dreyer's infamous "Gmuni" protest performance, in which she and collaborators stopped a Google Bus with circus tricks.

(Dreyer also curated an excellent similar but smaller show at Random Parts gallery this year entitled *BOOM: The Art of Resistance*). While each piece was powerful on its own, the collective impact set a new precedent for local art institutions, blurring the distinction between fine art and activism.

## Incarceration And Installation

### *Spaces from Yesterday*

For years, Oakland artist Amy Ho had two separate practices. In the studio, she created sculptural inquiries into the perception of space. Outside, she taught art classes to inmates at San Quentin prison. But this year, those practices began to intersect. Speaking with her students, Ho realized that mentally visualizing their favorite places was a way for inmates to resist the institution of prison, which robs them of any power of place. Inspired, Ho decided to help those visualizations break free and tell the stories behind them. Thus spawned *Spaces from Yesterday*, an ongoing series for which Ho creates immersive installations of inmates' favorite places, and presents them alongside an original rendering of that space by the incarcerated artist. The first was installed at Chandra Cerrito Gallery, and the second is currently at Royal Nonesuch. There are three more to come.



Grace Rosario Perkins (L) and Sarah Biscarra Dilley are members of the Black Salt Collective. Photo by: Bert Johnson.

## The Green Screen

### *Royal Production Company*

All summer long, the white walls at Temescal's Royal Nonesuch Gallery were transformed into a green screen. In an effort to nourish local video artists, curators turned the gallery into the Royal Production Company, a studio for experimental video work. Three artists (Carolyn Janssen, Kate Rhoades, Amber Cady) and one artist

collective (Bonanza) were each given three weeks to produce a film. The September showcase, celebrated with a red-carpet event at the Roxie Theater, included "cli-fi" film *The Drought*, about the real and imagined effects of the water crisis, and *Required Skimming*, a series of video vignettes illustrating seminal theoretical texts.

### **Total Transformations**

#### *Confluence at Aggregate Space*

The first time I went to Aggregate Space, during Brynda Glazier's 2013 solo show, the walls were covered entirely in AstroTurf. Curator Conrad Meyers has an admirable willingness to completely transform the space, and Kate Lee Short's *Confluence* did that better than any other show I saw this year. Massive, round pillars fell from the ceiling to form a sci-fi forest washed in dark blue lighting. Each pillar also functioned as a speaker, emitting low-frequency sounds that were at once disconcerting and soothing, evoking a feeling of disembodiment that thoroughly penetrated the senses.

### **Piñatas For Trump**

#### *Estamos contra el muro / We are Against the Wall*

In preparation for the November presidential election, Oakland artist Sita Bhaumik decided to build her own wall — out of piñatas. Inspired by the tradition of piñatas representing evil, Bhaumik commissioned Fruitvale piñata maker Victor Martínez to make three-hundred hollow cinder blocks. After assembling them at San Francisco's Southern Exposure, Bhaumik then invited community members to join her for a cathartic collective destruction — the most joyous political critique of the year.

### **Panthers at Fifty**

#### *All Power to the People*

For *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50*, Oakland Museum of California curator René de Guzman brought together rare Panther ephemera, stunning unearthed photos of the political group, and sharp contemporary artworks by the likes of Carrie Mae Weems and Hank Willis Thomas that follow in the Panther lineage. Together, the works prompt a deep consideration of the Panthers' cultural and aesthetic influence and importance — and constitute the best OMCA exhibition in recent memory.

### **Best Art Experience of the Year**

#### *Inside You is Me*

Dena Beard's curating at The Lab, located in San Francisco's Mission District, remains a frequent reason to cross the Bay. For the Lab's 2016 artist residencies — so far featuring Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon and Dora García, with Brontez Purnell forthcoming — she handed the artists keys to the venue, up to \$70,000, and free rein. In the case of Gordon, whose work also made my list last year, that freedom manifested into a constantly transforming immersive sound installation made up of directional speakers, movable sculptural diffusers, and live recording and editing by Gordon. Further, the Oakland artist activated the installation throughout her residency by inviting dancers to improvise inside of it while audience members milled around the space like fish caught in a sonic current. The best art experience I had all year.

### **East Bay in S.F.**

#### *SOMArts Cultural Center*

SOMArts is another San Francisco venue that's always crowded with East Bay artists. And this year, it hosted a series of hugely successful shows curated by those artists. Oakland's Black Salt Collective put on *Visions into Infinite Archives*, which showcased the work of Black, indigenous, and of color artists in a way that pushed back against Eurocentric art discourse. Karen Seneferu and Melorra Green curated *The Black Woman is God: Reprogramming that God Code*, which honed in on the divine artistic genius of Black women. And Kelly Lovemonster (who sometimes freelances for the *Express*) and James Fleming produced *Touch On*, a group show that questions what it means to curate through a fundamentally queer lens by moving past gender and sexuality into ontological inquiry.