



SAMPLING OAKLAND SAN FRANCISCO

"There is no there there," Gertrude Stein famously wrote of her childhood home—Oakland, California. Interpreted as a snarky comparison between the expat's beloved Paris and an unrefined, young city, her comment became shorthand for backward small towns across America. What Stein actually meant was that, during a trip home, she found Oakland changed beyond recognition. The place of her childhood had vanished, except in her memory. Since Stein's visit seventy years ago, Oakland has weathered many more seismic shifts: an economic crash following WWII; decades of urban blight and racial tension; and now, a divisive gentrification campaign.

Despite its flaws, Oakland is both beloved by long-time residents and attractive to creative types fleeing San Francisco's sky-high rents. Over the past decade, artists have transformed derelict bakeries and slot machine factories into galleries, performance spaces, and live-work collectives.

The exhibition *Sampling Oakland* offers a snapshot of this flourishing grassroots arts scene [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA); July 15—October 8, 2006]. Co-curated by the directors of Oakland's most prominent artist-run spaces—21 Grand, Black Dot Collective, Ego Park, Lobot, Mama Buzz, and Oaklandish—the show reveals how refreshingly provocative art can be when its creators aren't chained to an art-market assembly line. Since YBCA's organizing curator Berin Golonu gave the co-curators free rein, the selected works' shared preoccupation with urban space and histories, both real and imagined, can be seen to reflect the local zeitgeist rather than a curatorial agenda.

Erik Groff's arresting *Temple of Life (Homage to A.G. Rizzoli)*, 2006, casts a utopian mood. A floor-to-ceiling cityscape of painted cardboard and dumpster detritus—think Red Grooms' *sculpto-pictorama*—*Temple* depicts a decaying Oakland that contains the seeds of its possible rebirth. Groff tagged his decrepit temple-city with Masonic imagery like double-headed eagles and

mottoes such as *Spes Mea in Deo Est* [My hope is in God]. At the heart of this installation lies a Masonic temple, suggested by two pillars and a cardboard awning emblazoned with the sign "Great is Cheops," referring to Khufu, the pharaoh who commissioned the Great Pyramid of Giza. Masonry's goal is to build the candidate as a temple—remember *Cremaster 3*? Here, it also provides a recipe for civic revitalization. The Rosetta stone to the installation is Achilles Rizzoli, a quirky San Francisco draftsman who made highly detailed drawings of fantastical cathedrals and towers that he considered symbolic portraits of friends and family. Thus, *Temple*'s system triangulates body with architecture, architecture with polis, and polis with body. It both aspires to show that an enlightened body produces a united polis and warns that a blighted polis reflects its benighted inhabitants.

The class and race tensions implied in *Temple* come to the fore in Black Dot Collective's *A Shrine To The Anti-Gentrification Gods of Oakland, May They Protect Us From the Invaders*, 2006. Some view outgoing mayor Jerry Brown's gentrification initiatives as a way to drive out a broad spectrum of minorities. Seven-foot-tall letters, constructed from cast-off wood, doors, and corrugated metal, spell the word "Oakland." Festooned with nails, thumbtacks, bottles of colored powder, voodoo recipes, and "No Trespassing" signs, *A Shrine* both subverts African-American stereotypes and uses ritual elements from African diasporic cultures. Its neighbor, Bruce Busby's *Creativity Enhancement Shelter #BMCD 702*, 2002, shifts the debate to socio-economic and countercultural minorities also deeply impacted by gentrification. Based on Busby's pseudo-science, a silvery-white, teepee-like camping tent provides a filtration system to protect the user from the fictional, creativity-inhibiting compound OP2.

Other works cast Oakland's history as an intricately woven tapestry of stories. In Veronica De Jesus' series of pen-on-paper portraits entitled *A Handful of Some Pretty*

Special People, 2004-2006, the artist memorializes those who have lived in or passed through the city, from academic celebrity Jacques Derrida to homegrown teacher Dr. Curtis Barefoot. Jeff Hull's must-see video montage *A Local Love Retrospective*, 2006, transforms silent film clips, 1950s newsreels, and TV news footage into a unique version of Oakland's past century. Here, minorities are the up-from-nothing victors over the white power structure.

Self-propelled vehicles star in Mads Lynnerup's two-minute videos *Car*, 2006, and *Shopping Cart*, 2006. *Car* features a driverless Toyota Corolla on a spin around Oakland's abandoned, weed-infested warehouse district. It's shown on a monitor in front of a banner-sized photo of a graffiti-covered brick wall, which itself appears in the video. This locates the viewer simultaneously inside the filmed urban landscape, and outside of it—as a voyeur watching a film. Similarly, a food-filled cart rolls itself through Safeway in the second video, shown on a monitor that sits on a simulated grocery store shelf stocked with food. Lynnerup's homage to Robert Smithson's *Nonsites* foregrounds the notion that a site—here, Oakland—is a sprawling entity with no focal point. Though Oakland, or any place for that matter, is ultimately unknowable, Lynnerup's videos coax the viewer to consider the city from multiple perspectives.

The show's shortcomings are primarily spatial: *Sampling Oakland* deserved YBCA's much larger first-floor gallery. Instead, it's confined to the smaller second floor. Fortunately, Golonu realized that there was so much more in Oakland that a sequel is in the pipeline. Stay tuned for YBCA's *East Side Story*, opening this October.

—Eleanor LeBeau

ABOVE: Erik Groff, *Grand Ave. (I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies!)*, 2003, mixed media, variable dimensions [courtesy of the artist and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts]