
"These Things Are Like Yeast": 50 Years On, New College Artists Remain Collective

by VITA HEWITT | Sep 26, 2024 4:30 pm

THE NEW COLLEGE CIRCLE
THE LIFE-LONG IMPACT OF A CREATIVE SCHOOL

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Once, when I was a young, bright-eyed MFA student, a professor told the class to "look to the left of you. Look to the right of you. You should know that only one in five of you will still be making art in five years time. As the years go on, it will be even less."

In the mid- to late- 1970s, a group of students from New College of California defied these expectations and created their own path over five decades. Utilizing the radically experimental education offered by the school and the friendships forged within it, they found ways around and through the barriers that keep young artists from becoming mature artists. Their impressive body of work spanning 50 years can be found on view at Gray Loft Gallery now through Nov. 10.

A row of uniforms belonging to artist Henry S. Rosenthal (pictured at top) greet you as you walk in. Among them are one for the San Francisco Police Department and another for the Chabot Space and Science Center. Between the years of 2009 and 2020, Rosenthal, who is also a prolific filmmaker, trained for the right to don each outfit.

A taxidermied, forlorn two-headed calf hangs in a place of honor in the corner. A panel of wallpaper with repeating two-headed calves accents it. This addition to the show is not a surprise considering that he curates the world's largest collection of two-headed calves.

As I made my way through the enormous group of New College alumni and young artists, I spotted the work of Meredith Tromble. Tromble's art is as varied as it is delightful. Multi-media installations adorn two walls. A Mesmerizing video piece showing a figure dancing across space and color pairs nicely with the mural of a hawk, seemingly in mid-screech as newspapers fly around its head. It is Tromble who catalyzed (not curated) the show. An alumna of New College with an MFA from Mills, Tromble then became a professor at the San Francisco Art Institute. She believes that this trifecta of schools that have failed or merged over the last fifteen years has left a creative silence in the Bay.

The environment of having a steady stream of people who have experienced a small special art school or an experimental humanities school or a school with an amazing program in experimental music, all of these kinds of things are like yeast,” she says. “They make the whole environment rise up with a little more creativity. I think one of the things that makes the Bay Area very special is that we’ve had these incredibly rich institutions for a long time. Because they are going away right now and are highly threatened, this seemed like the time to do this show.” Tromble adds. “I wanted to talk about the value, how this helped us all maintain rich creative lives for decades.”

Gazing around the room, it is easy to see how we all have benefitted by the works, films and performances of these schools.

Archival materials of New College events displayed a vivid world of art happenings that make me long to have been there. Michael Patrick Lynch’s multimedia works show prints of animals that the artist traveled the world to make casts of. Drawings of the animals border the prints in a solemn salute to the natural world.

Each piece in this show is carefully considered and shows a group of artists that, though varied in idea, share a core of joyful creation.

“I think it’s important to see the show because it’s a very interesting historical exhibition of these artists and the trajectory of their artistic careers.” Says Jan Watten, founder and gallerist of Gray Loft. “Each unique person has their own identity and their own group of work.”

Watten, whose photographs are also included in the show, did not attend New College as a student but photographed many of their shows. Since founding the gallery in 2012, Watten has continued to support and nurture artists who share in these creative ideals.

If you are an artist or art-lover in the Bay Area, do not miss this show. Gray Loft Gallery has events all month long — so feel free to drop in.

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