

DATEBOOK

ART & EXHIBITS

Review: Final opening exhibitions at ICA SF show promise fulfilled at Dogpatch museum



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Now that the final two exhibitions in the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco's inaugural trio of shows have opened — “A Weed by Any Other Name” and “Resting Our Eyes” — the new museum in the Dogpatch neighborhood finally feels complete.

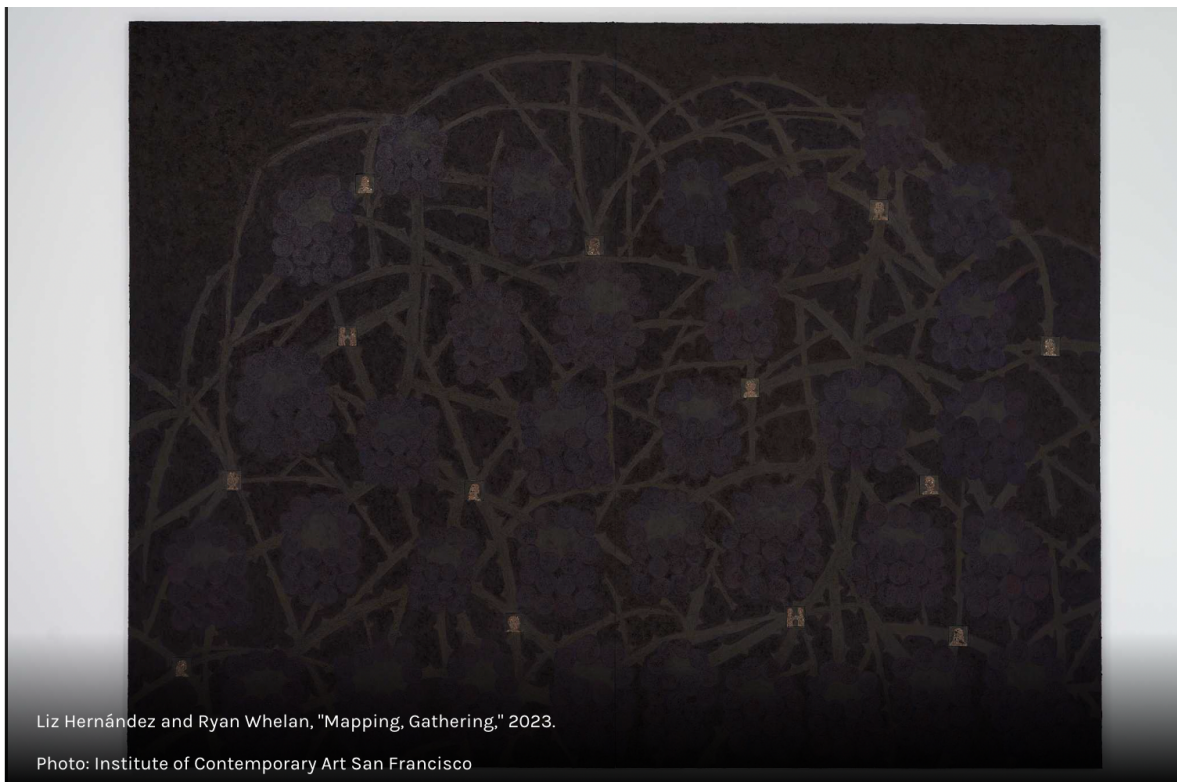
Since announcing its creation in 2021, the ICA SF has touted itself as a new kind of museum. Founding director Ali Gass has emphasized creating an institution nimble enough that it can swiftly respond to issues affecting the

Bay Area. Following the radical reinterpretation of the indigenous land acknowledgment practice in Jeffrey Gibson's site-specific installation **"This Burning World,"** which opened the museum in October, both new exhibitions feel timely and relevant.

"A Weed by Any Other Name," by Oakland artists Liz Hernández and Ryan Whelan, features four paintings commissioned by the museum that ruminate on the nature of the Bay Area arts ecosystem. At the center of the works is a metaphor comparing the local scene to a blackberry bush, an idea that came to the duo while working with fellow Oakland artist Alicia McCarthy on a zine for the 2021 Art Bash at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The bramble plant grows wild in many parts of the region and is notably resilient: Even when the bush is cut away, its root systems remain and often spread. Hernández and Whelan saw blackberries as evocative of the survival of local artists in the face of evictions, pandemic exodus and community deracination.

"We knew right away there's no use in depicting this issue literally, showing people walking away or migrating to other cities," said Hernández. "We wanted to utilize this metaphor as a way to explain the ecosystem and the intersection between communities."

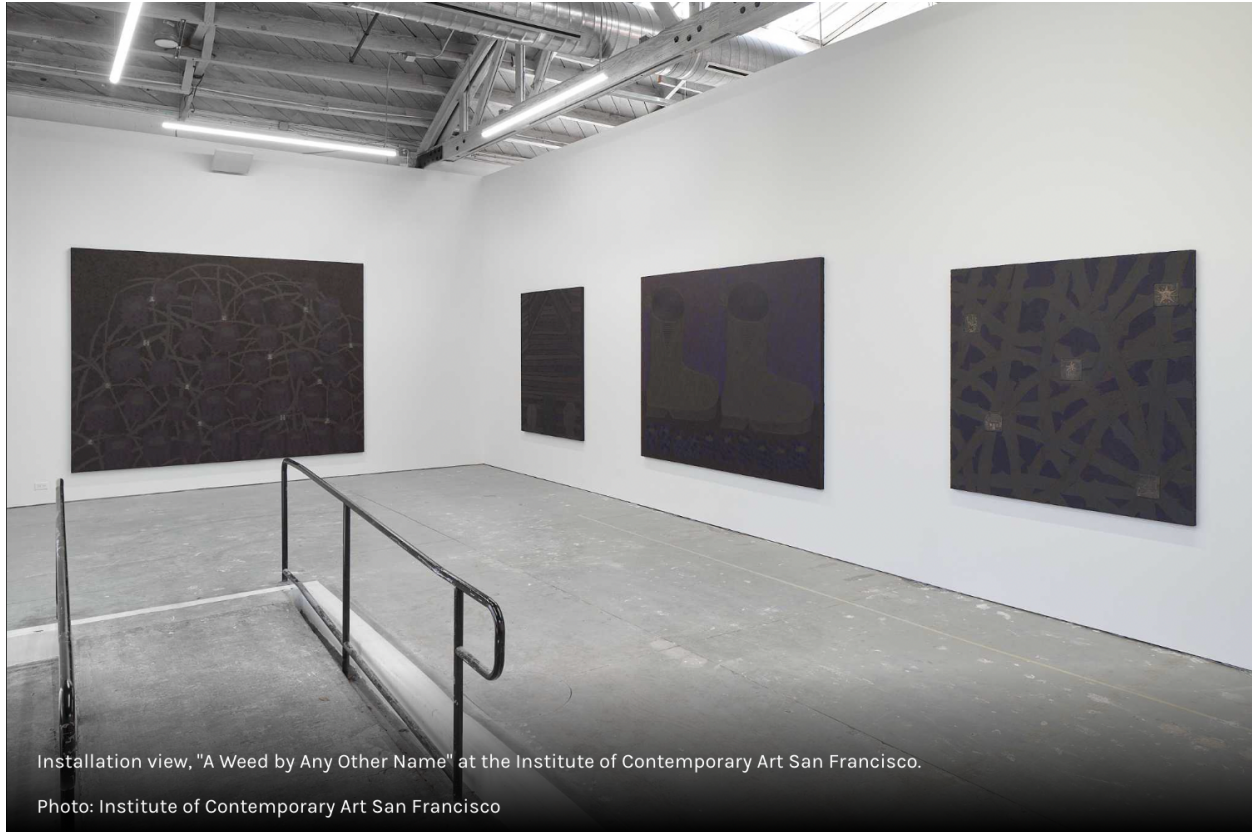


Those intersections are represented in two of the paintings: “Mapping, Gathering” and “Hopes, Wishes,” which show thorny vines entangled, forming a connected web reminiscent of maps and family trees. All four works in the show are painted on wood panel and are seductively dark, using a mix of acrylic paint, soil and pumice to achieve not only a variety of tones, but also a uniquely organic texture. Embedded in both works are volcanic cantera stone. Cameo-like portraits are etched on the stone in “Mapping, Gathering,” while figures including a house, a blackberry and a foot appear in “Hopes, Wishes.”

“Push, Pull” depicts boots that seem to hover above a line of plump berries, while “A house, a Home” shows the backs of two heads gazing at architectural lines that form the peak of a roof, a image full of yearning in the context of the local real estate market.

All four paintings are so dark that digital images cannot do them justice. It demands to be seen in person, and probably more than once to experience the works in different qualities of light. When seen up close and at varying angles, the spectrum of purple, brown and deep blue hues is captivating in how they reveal the forms.

“A big part of (the dark colors) for me is the idea that in nature, the depth of the dark color of something is not created by the absence of vibrancy, it's all these colors meshing together and vibrating together,” Whelan explained. “I feel like that's even a metaphor that works its way into this series. True depth is not the absence of things.”



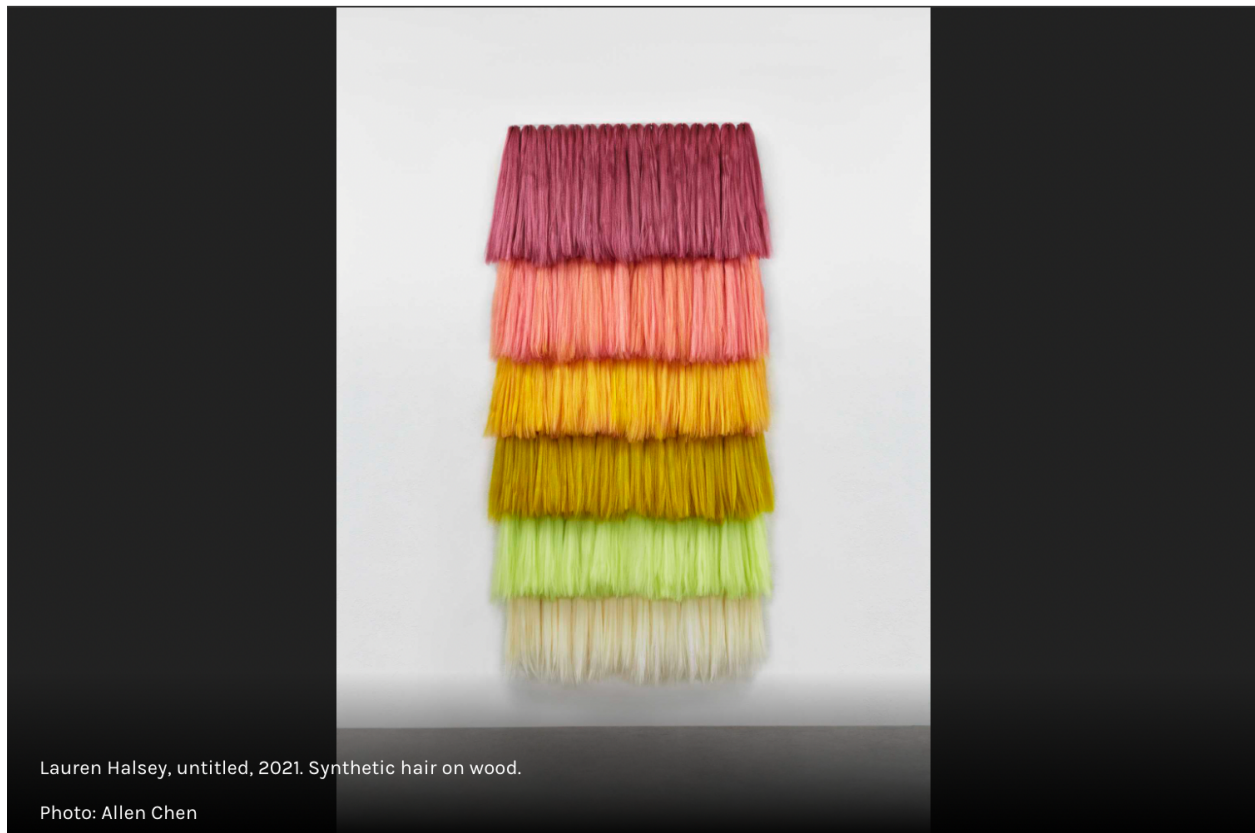
In the second part of the gallery, “Resting Our Eyes” brings the viewer into a world of color and light. Co-curated by Oakland artist Tahirah Rasheed, a co-founder of the See Black Womxn collective, and Los Angeles artist Autumn Breon, a graduate of Stanford University, the exhibition is inspired by the 1970s Black feminist lesbian group the Combahee River Collective and its philosophy of abolition and liberation.

The show explores those concepts through depictions of Black women that engage with ideas of rest, leisure and adornment. The 20 multigenerational, international Black artists featured in the show are an all-star lineup that includes Mickalene Thomas, Simone Leigh, **Sadie Barnette**, Lorna Simpson, **Hank Willis Thomas**, **Ebony Patterson**, Deborah Willis and a video installation by Leila Weefur.

Institutions often fall back on images of struggle and of violence when showing the Black experience, Rasheed noted.

“We wanted to take control of that narrative and give folks the opportunity to see what power Black women have ... to understand the ways that we are using

self-care, leisure and adornment as these radical acts that create freedom of expression and empowerment,” said Rasheed.



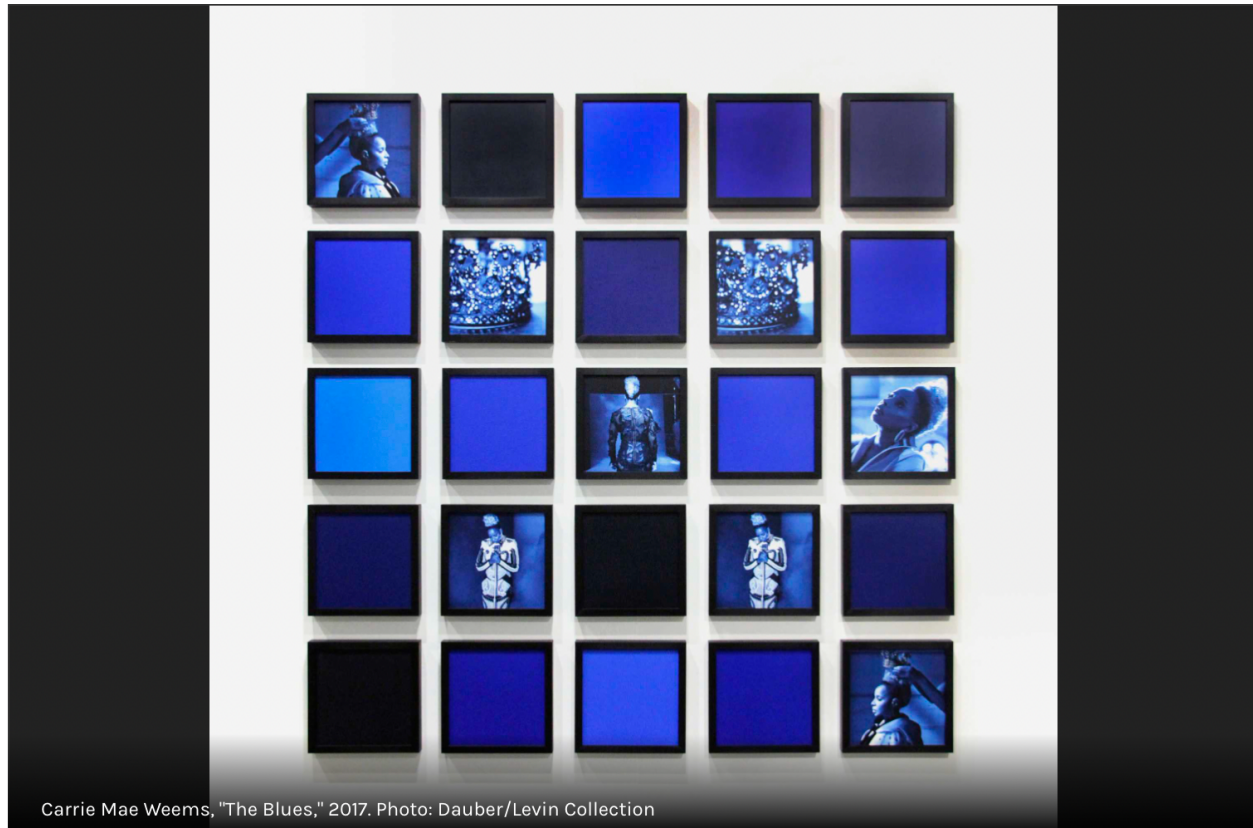
There’s a joyful extravagance to works like an untitled installation of pastel-hued synthetic hair by Los Angeles artist Lauren Halsey and bicoastal artist Genevieve Gaignard’s found hand mirror installation “Look What We’ve Become.” Berkeley artist **Lava Thomas**’ wall-mounted “Clouds of Joy,” consisting of blue tambourines, acrylic disks and mirrors, offers a more meditative kind of abundance, while Los Angeles artist **Alison Saar**’s sculpture “Set to Simmer,” showing a reclining nude woman atop a desk holding a frying pan, radiates with casual defiance.

Also of note are three **Carrie Mae Weems** photographs on view, including two works from the Syracuse, N.Y., artist’s “Kitchen Table” series in the 1990s as well as 2017’s photo installation work “The Blues.”

“It was so important for us to acknowledge the artists that have really paved the way for communicating these concepts, and also the influence that she has had on other artists in the exhibition,” said Breon of Weems.

The combination of the three exhibitions is as powerful a declaration of the ICA SF's intent as any mission statement.

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Carrie Mae Weems, "The Blues," 2017. Photo: Dauber/Levin Collection

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