

Progress and missteps marked 2019 in Bay Area art

Charles Desmarais December 10, 2019 Updated: December 11, 2019, 6:11 pm



Zanele Muholi's "Bona, Charlottesville" (2015) was included in the Contemporary Jewish Museum exhibition "Show Me as I Want to Be Seen."

Photo: Yancey Richardson

The Bay Area visual art scene in 2019, like seemingly every aspect of life these days, was marked by political considerations once thought outside its boundaries.

In certain aspects, that was a very good thing, as **traditional centers of authority ceded a degree of power** — or, at least, competed to demonstrate to an increasingly diverse community their accessibility and inclusivity. Regardless of the motive, for example, behind adding works by artists of color to our public collections, the net result is that the future will at least know that such artists were here.

Untempered political passion can also have a blinding effect, however, as we saw in several important instances this year. And then there were **the choices made**, not for the sake of art and its value to community, but out of mere expediency. Those decisions, too, will shape our tomorrows.



Among the works acquired by SFMOMA with proceeds from the sale of a Mark Rothko painting was Leonora Carrington's "The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot" (1946).

Photo: © Estate of Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

SFMOMA sells a Rothko

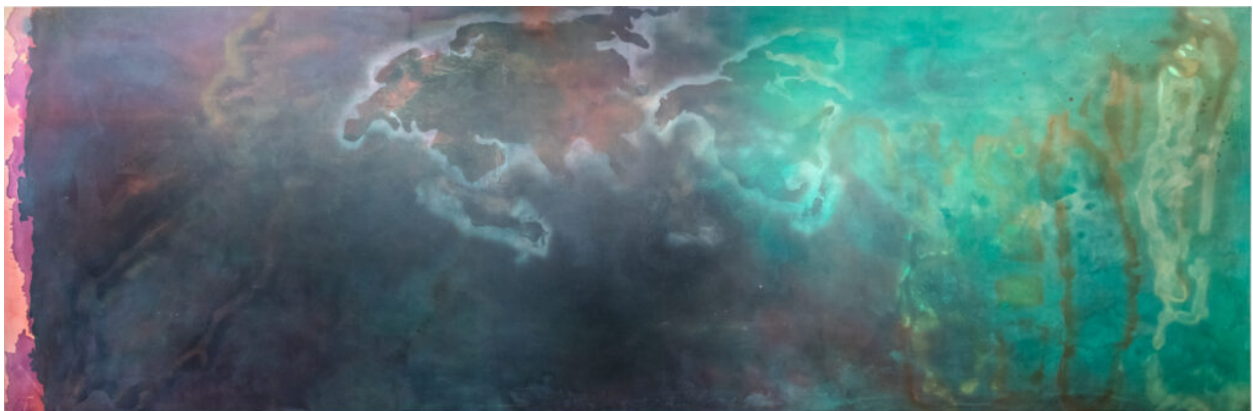
When leaders at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art wished to broaden the museum's collection to include more works of art by women, LGBTQ artists and artists

of color, **they decided to employ a venerable museum practice:** deaccessioning. Recognizing that they missed the boat when works that now command six- and seven-figure prices were affordable, they decided to effectively trade a pricey object — a Mark Rothko painting eventually **sold for \$50.1 million at auction** — for strong works of lesser value.

There was pushback, and there were **legitimate questions**. Some asked, “Why not tap those rich trustees?” And though the museum has other great Rothkos, was this too good a work to let go? **In the end**, it was enough for me that rare and major works by Rebecca Belmore, Forrest Bess, Frank Bowling, Leonora Carrington, Lygia Clark, Norman Lewis, Barry McGee, Kay Sage, Alma Thomas and Mickalene Thomas now grace our city.

Museums make space for neglected artists

It wasn't only SFMOMA that made big strides in collection diversity this year. The UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (whose director, Lawrence Rinder, **announced his retirement** in September) accepted **a gift of nearly 3,000 quilts** of superb design by African American artists.



Frank Bowling's monumental painting “Penumbra” (1970), measuring nearly 8 x 23 feet, was acquired in 2019 for the permanent collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. It is currently on view at the de Young museum.

Photo: Gary Sexton, FAMSF

Shortly after the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco opened **the excellent exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,”** on view at the de Young through

March 15, they announced acquisition of the monumental painting “Penumbra” (1970) by featured artist Frank Bowling. At nearly 23 feet wide, the vintage masterwork is even larger than SFMOMA’s 17-foot Bowling, painted in 2018.

Also of note were the Contemporary Jewish Museum’s celebration of gender-nonconforming artists and themes, **“Show Me as I Want to Be Seen,”** and the Museum of the African Diaspora’s **“Black Refractions: Highlights From The Studio Museum in Harlem,”** both of which were presented in the first half of the year.



Bernice Bing, a Chinese American lesbian artist involved in the Bay Area art scene in the 1960s, painted “Mayacamas No. 6, March 12” (1963).

Photo: Randy Dodson

Continuing through Jan. 5 is the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art's abbreviated-but-revelatory survey of **Abstract Expressionist Bernice Bing**, a proud Chinese American lesbian outsider, even in the days of beatnik San Francisco. And still on view through Feb. 14 at SFMOMA, "**Soft Power**" examines the approaches of a broader range of socially engaged artists.

CJM, SVMA and SFMOMA developed their own content, while MoAD and the de Young signed on to national tours. The key to the success of all these shows was that they focused first on art of complexity, rather than lazily relying on sloganeering, as the plethora of self-consciously "political" exhibitions often do.



A segment of the mural "Westward Vision," by Victor Arnautoff, which depicts George Washington directing gun-carrying colonists westward and an apparently slain Native American, is a focus of controversy at George Washington High School.

Photo: Jim Wilson, New York Times

Censorship and self-interest

Several important decisions this year were marred by shortsightedness. In June the San Francisco Board of Education **considered complaints from some parents and students** that an 83-year-old mural at George Washington High School causes psychic harm. It depicts such despicable institutions as slavery and the slaughter of Native Americans in the pursuit of our so-called "manifest destiny."

Rather than seeing an educational opportunity in the mural's content, which plainly implicates Washington in a shameful period of American history that should never be forgotten, the school board voted to permanently paint it over. After an uproar both local and national, the board backed off. Yet it **still plans to censor the work** by boarding it up, unless citizen action and promised lawsuits prevail.



Lava Thomas' proposed public monument to Maya Angelou was accepted, then rejected under pressure by a committee of the San Francisco Arts Commission.

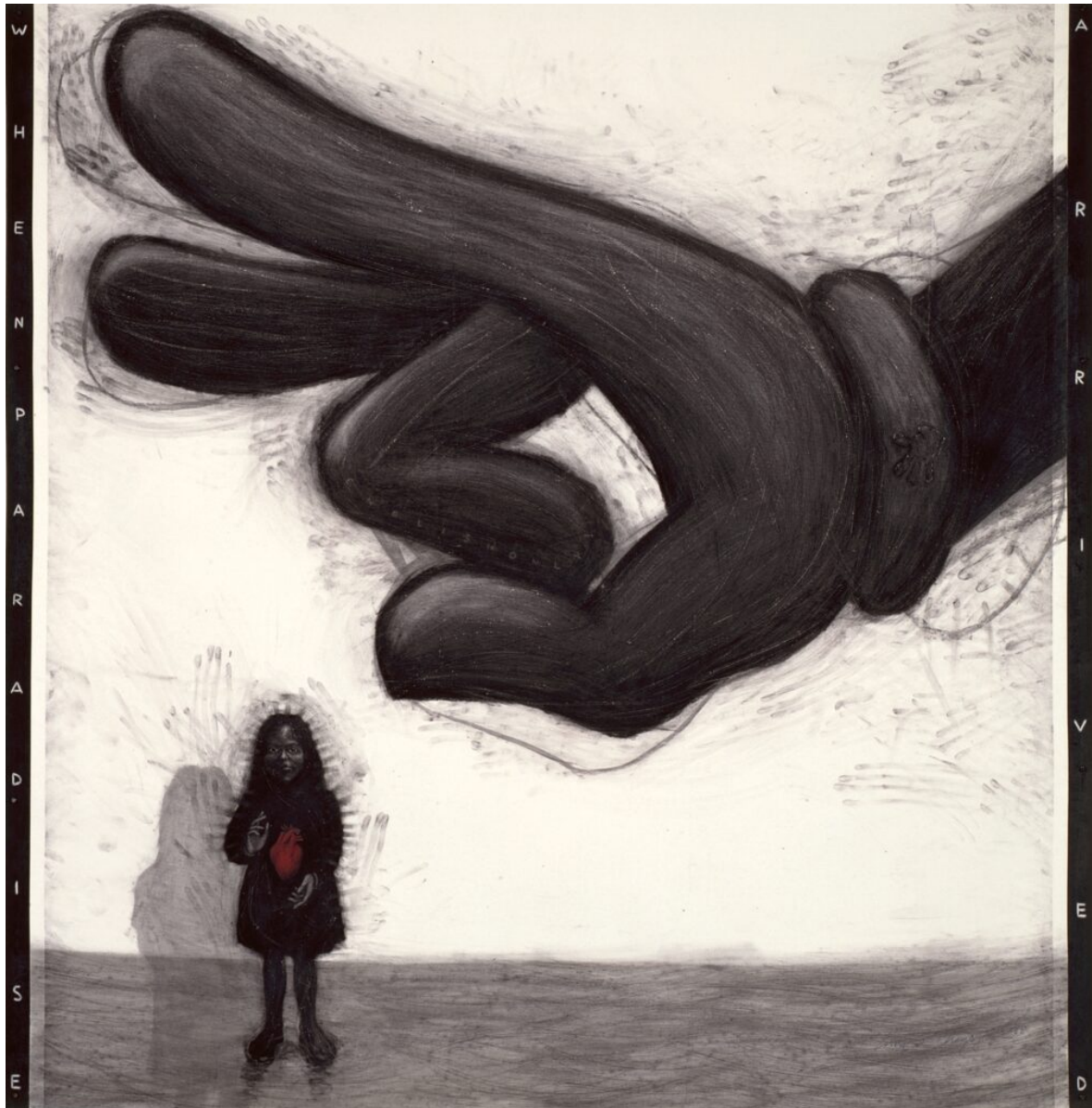
Photo: Lava Thomas

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Arts Commission, a group that calls itself "the city agency that champions the arts," once again **showed its cowardice when art was under attack**. Its Visual Arts Committee knuckled under when county Supervisor Catherine Stefani demanded rejection of a winning design for a sculpture of poet Maya Angelou.

Berkeley artist Lava Thomas, who is African American, won the competition for the public monument fair and square, with a 9-foot bronze representation of a book bearing

Angelou's face and a quotation from her work. But Stefani, after the fact, insisted that only "a statue-type figure" would do — and the committee went meekly along.

And speaking of a failure of courage, one can hardly ignore the announcement in July by Napa's di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art that **it would abandon its founding mission**, selling off most of the 1,600 works of art in its fabled collection of works by Bay Area artists. The center's board and its director said, in short, that it is just too hard to raise \$3 million a year, or to trim programs to fit its resources.



Among the works in the collection of the di Rosa Center in Napa — at least for now — is Enrique Chagoya's "When Paradise Arrived" (1988).

Photo: di Rosa collection

Outraged artists, many of whom thought their legacy would be preserved at di Rosa, say they donated or deeply discounted the works now destined for the auction block. Their appeal that center officials identify “an alternative institution to house, preserve and appropriately utilize this unique collection” has fallen on deaf ears.

In the final days of November, a letter signed by center director Robert Sain **came to light**. Quietly circulated among commercial galleries and auction houses, it offered for sale 18 important works from the collection. Near the top of the list: a 31-foot-high monumental sculpture by Mark di Suvero titled “For Veronica,” dedicated to the wife of the center’s late founder.