

Press release for exhibition

For Immediate Release: January 14, 2004

Euphrat Museum of Art

De Anza College,
21250 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Cupertino, CA 95014
(just east of Flint Center on the De Anza College campus)
408 864-8836

Art exhibition:

City Life: Seyed Alavi, Katherine Aoki, Harriete Estel Berman, Jessica Dunne, Lewis Watts, Kim Yasuda

February 25 – April 16, 2004
Closed Spring Break March 29 – April 2

Museum Hours: M – Th, 10-4
Open to tour groups by appointment.

Reception: Tuesday, March 16, 6-8 pm with artist presentations

Artists:

Seyed Alavi, Katherine Aoki, Harriete Estel Berman, Jessica Dunne, Lewis Watts, Kim Yasuda

City Life presents art related to the urban experience, the exhilaration and the entrapment — so hard “to get away from it all.” The exhibition highlights urban transportation, work, architecture (buildings, landscape and interiors), public art, neighborhoods, and life styles. The artists Seyed Alavi, Katherine Aoki, Harriete Estel Berman, Jessica Dunne, Lewis Watts, and Kim Yasuda have employed a variety of media: sculpture, painting, printmaking, photography, and mixed media installation

Lewis Watts presents photographs of urban life in Oakland, selections from his series *Evidence: The Oakland Cultural Landscape Project*. Oakland attracted Lewis “because of the critical mass of African Americans living there... It is a place that wears its heart on its sleeve. Between 1993 and 1997, I developed a concentrated body of work, looking at West Oakland. I photographed street life, the inside and outside of churches, in clubs, in parks, at public gatherings, and in homes. I have documented the ways that people personalize their living spaces, institutions and places of business, and the other ways that “footprints” of people's lives appear in the landscape. I have also

photographed the people who inhabit these environments and how they relate to their surroundings. I have continually noted the similarities and differences between Oakland and other African American communities especially in the South... Many of these traces are African in origin: public expressions of grief and celebration, the sense of neighborhoods as a village, and strong spiritual belief that is expressed visually." "I have noticed a strong sense of family and community here... There is certainly poverty, crime, and misery... There is also a strong religious faith as shown by the many churches that function as spiritual, social, and educational institutions. There are barbershops and beauty parlors that function as places where oral and visual histories are passed on and collected on the walls."

Jessica Dunne paints a different urban scene, often at night. Street scenes, parking lots, freeways. The quality of light illuminating dark city streets was one early motivator, with her aim to capture the light of the greenish mercury-vapor and pink sodium-vapor lamps before they were switched to sun-like halide bulbs. In a way she has romanticized the industrialized urban landscape. Yet no one walks on these streets. Instead there are headlights and taillights, cars speeding, cars at rest. The infrastructure of a city. The sameness. Yet beauty. And certainly familiarity. In *Escape from the Zoo*, a car tries to leave the San Francisco zoo's empty parking lot at night, but is stopped by a guard gate. Suddenly the parking lot is ominous, unsettling. Eerie trees are silhouetted against a dark sky. But is the car escaping the zoo? Or entering the zoo of nocturnal urban life?

Seyed Alavi starts with what appears to be a traditional notion of urban photography — understanding a city or neighborhood by looking at its inhabitants. Alavi photographed numerous people on Market Street in San Francisco — merchants, business people, tourists, and others. He layered their facial images, six at a time, to create a composite image. A series of these composite images were displayed as large (6'x4') posters, placed in kiosks along Market Street. The faces were superimposed in a way that individual characteristics of each person remained, and yet no person was recognizable in the final composite face. These images then go beyond traditional understanding of the character of an urban area to raising questions about personal identity. How are we altered by our proximity to others? How much do we pick up from them, and how much do we share of ourselves? Alavi is known for his public art, including murals. He has worked on public art commissions for various cities, attentive to the specific nature of the city neighborhood and what it needs, and always involving locals in his process.

Kim Yasuda presents large photographs of Tokyo subway scenes: "Subscapes." Unlike the previous artists, she investigated a city with which she was not familiar. Her work is as much about her experience in Tokyo as it is about the city. Coming from California, she immediately felt a scale shift in space-conscious Tokyo. "Everything was smaller. I was oversized." Here she exhibits images she recorded in Tokyo's extensive underground, using a digital video camera. Yasuda gives a sense of the experience of riding or waiting for the underground trains, — an everyday landscape in Japanese

urban life. She explores ideas of personal and public space in Japanese culture — how one handles the proximity or closeness of other people in a transit experience. Yasuda was an artist in residence for six months in Tokyo. As a third-generation Japanese American, Yasuda was surprised by this first visit to Japan. She had anticipated some easy affiliation with the Japanese part of her Japanese American cultural identity. She says, "I was less Japanese than I thought I was". Her photographic portraits may reveal some of her disconnection.

Harriete Estel Berman gently prods us city dwellers to rethink our habits. She calls attention to the integral role of the art world in the rampant consumerism that has decked out our cities with malls and quality shopping experiences. For example, she exhibits a chair and a stack of teacups, consumer items of the "good life;" these were made from recycled tin consumer products which often include images of or references to master artworks. A focal point of her installation is a nine-foot-square sculpture of grass, also sculpted from recycled tins. It highlights the grass lawn as an ultimate consumer icon of American culture — a status symbol requiring special feeding, attention, and care. Berman comments on environmental concerns regarding lawns (pesticides, herbicides) and the implicit message: "I own this space. I don't need to use it." In Berman's humorous communication, we can see that her art lawn is the better investment. This turf can be displayed inside — on a pedestal, with proper lighting. And since it was made from recycled tin, it helps reduce the load that goes to the city dump.

Through prints, works on paper, and artist books, **Katherine Aoki** creates something new, an active urban world populated with women who provoke us to challenge gender-related expectations. Using humor, advertising, and cartoon styles, she plays with role reversals or placing characters in surprising situations. One body of work is about women who are superheroes because of their learned vocational skills. Unlike popular heroines, such as the Powerpuff Girls, who were imbued with super powers via chemical accident, these characters, such as the urban lawyer who comes flying in with her briefcase, are just really good at their jobs. Another current body of work, entitled *The Construction of Modern Girlhood*, addresses the salable "girl power" myth and the media's pressure on girls. Aoki creates a world run by anime-style female construction workers who build huge monuments to girlhood. Construction equipment is decorated with hearts and tulips. "I want the viewer to initially think, 'Right-on, girl power...'" However, closer inspection reveals that in these cities the stylized female characters are building false monuments to girlhood. These ruthless construction cuties boss around a small army of teddy bears, who represent innocent girls transformed by the media."

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Call Jan Rindfleisch 408-864-8836 for more information.