

Reviews

Northern California

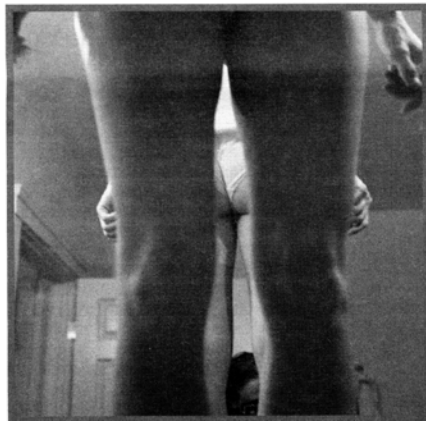
Migdalia Valdes at Intersection for the Arts

How do we understand the world? How can we capture a sense of the parade of images we pass each day, that become embedded in our vast storehouse of memories, color our sense of who we are, and remind us what is familiar or not? How is it possible to portray the sense of relationship to places that emanate from a deep space within?

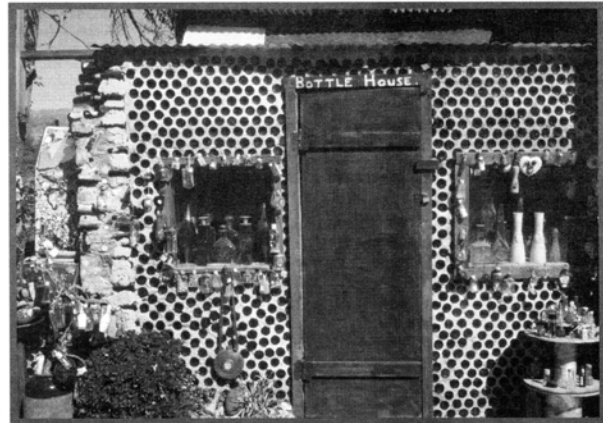
Migdalia Valdes's project *Every Day in Black and White* captures and communicates this set of questions, while simultaneously evoking myriad feelings. Installed in Intersection for the Arts's pristine gallery, Valdes's diaristic collection of black and white images—a representation of the first decade of her decision to create at least one photograph a day for the rest of her life—inspires a sense of wonder in the everyday. Interiors, exteriors, group and single portraits of people, some sculptural elements that fill the center of the space—a stroller, a pair of gessoed white jeans adorned with flowers hanging from a ladder, a rocking chair holding a photo album—are a few of the many types of images and objects that create a sense of this person's life. Whether real or fabricated, we become voyeurs, invited to consider Valdes's life, but also, inevitably, to see ourselves in these photographs. Ranging from street scenes, landscapes and light fixture patterns to a woman in the bath, clock faces, carnies, the Ferry Building, neon signs and the frozen image of a swimming shark on a TV screen,

Valdes creates a rich montage that is simultaneously deeply personal and extremely universal.

How she achieves this is predicated, in part, on her use of a Rolleiflex camera that features square format negatives, and her choice to print only in black and white. The usual distancing of the viewer from the photographic image by the formality of framing, which Valdes does use for medium and large format images that circle the room, is mitigated by a second ring of small contact prints beneath the more formal presentation. Cut into vertical pairs or sets of three or four images, these pictures become an architecture of the artists' life, suggesting a cityscape of varying height buildings. Like so many storied windows, they create conversations among themselves and with the larger pictures under which they rest on the wall. Valdes's strategy is quite significant, as the more considered presence of the largest and medium sized framed works—selected from her *Every Year in Black and White*, and *Every Month in*



Migdalia Valdes, (above) *With my girlfriend*, San Francisco, CA, 2005, black and white photograph, 16" x 20"; (below) *With my father*, Goa, India, 2007, black and white photograph, 16" x 20", at Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco.



Grandma (Tressa) Prisbrey, *Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California*, 1972, at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco. (Photo: Seymour Rosen.)

*Black and White* series—are animated by the unedited ring of small contact prints that comprise *Every Day in Black and White*, which activates the installation and our engagement with the work.

Valdes pushes even further in her request that the viewer engage with this pictorial memoir by inviting us to leaf through the many scrapbooks filled with photographs, magazine pages, newspaper photographs and small drawings that are stacked in the center of the gallery among the various sculptural accoutrements. Although it was somewhat unsettling to learn that these quotidian objects were plucked off the streets near Valdes's home rather than having any deep personal significance, they become corporeal extensions of her process of selecting and capturing found elements on film, all part of her everyday life. Their messy arrangement enhances Valdes's compositional tendencies, seeming a natural way to reveal stories of a life lived.

Although the work has the potential to beg the question of why should we care about ten years of this artist's life, the breadth of subjects and montage-like structure of the installation encourages our deep engagement with it. Filmic in presentation and somewhat nostalgic, Valdes creates a circumstance that allows viewers to project themselves onto these black and white images, and to consider ourselves within the narratives she introduces. We become part of the history of her work, and by extension, these everyday images become part of us.

—Terri Cohn

Migdalia Valdes: *Every Day in Black and White* closed May 23 at Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco.

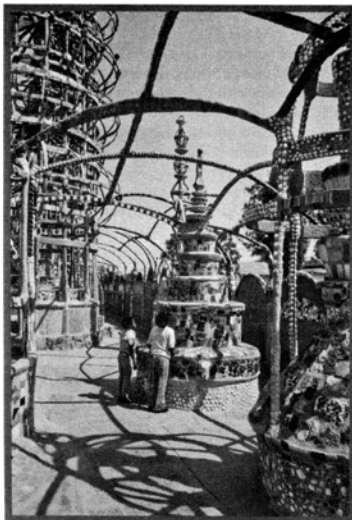
Terri Cohn is a contributing editor to Artweek.

'Inside/Outside: Artist Environments' at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art

San Francisco's Museum of Craft and Folk Art (MOFCA), in its relatively new downtown digs, has been questioning the standard notion of both arts & crafts and folk (or outsider) art. Their recent *Inside/Outside* exhibition, featuring structures and environments built by artists working outside the conventional art world, brings those questions into direct contact with a wide range of examples of 'creative homes and gardens' on the West Coast.

The show begins with a selection of famous California structures and landscapes built by self-trained artists who generally constructed enormous art worlds on their own properties, accumulating found and recycled materials over many years. Simon Rodia's famous Watts Towers is featured, naturally, but so is Grandma Prisbrey's Simi Valley *Bottle Village*, and Litto Damonte's *Hulcap Ranch*; each are lifelong projects of collection and display, incorporating the detritus of modernity directly into the foundations of the California domicile. It is interesting to note how many of these projects were built by immigrants and migrants to California, as if the fabled "Go West" call brought visionaries peculiarly equipped for the strange desert-and-plastic freeway landscapes of the region.

Two artists from Oakland's Creative Growth Arts Center represent contemporary takes on the built environment, both using the map as a kind of outward expression of interiority. Merritt Wallace's colorful cityscape suggests a



library of street-art and skater books and comics, or to DJ the music and video on '60s-era lo-fi consoles. Here, hipster surf culture meets quotidian home living, without feeling overdone or ironic. Instead, Shine's shack and the wide-ranging artworks within



activities. Re-creating the shack in the museum site offers visitors the opportunity to engage with the work, thereby expanding the community and challenging the greater notions of what belongs inside and outside. The public is invited inside the shack to browse Shine's reference library, to sit and read, to work on

## Ursula O'Farrell at Toomey Tourell Fine Art

**A**s if in the aftermath of a great struggle, the gallery nearly hums with energy during an exhibition of new paintings by Ursula O'Farrell. Nine large, clamorous canvases seem to defy formal order with their vigorous push-pull of thick, saturated color against thin transparent tint. Large, amorphous areas alternately loom towards the viewer or recede into intriguingly magnetic distances. With this series, O'Farrell uses bold, gestural lines that often disobey an impulse towards recognizable form but rather seem let loose to wander the canvas. In these works, painted primarily during the first months of 2009, O'Farrell takes her boldest step in a decades-long journey from classical figuration to figurative abstraction—sometimes right to the edge of chaos.

In an essay prefacing the catalog for this body of work in its three West Coast exhibitions, Peter Selz attributes O'Farrell a prominent place in the third generation of Bay Area Figurative Painters, deeming her a sibling of Christopher Brown and Roger Herrmann and successor to Elmer Bischoff, David Park and Richard Diebenkorn. O'Farrell arrived at this place honestly from an early grounding in classical studies in Florence and then of Abstract Expressionism in Germany, an MFA, then a fifteen-year hiatus to raise a family. Reclaiming her artistic life less than a decade ago, the artist has since pushed herself relentlessly in successive series of paintings to materialize ideas incubated over decades. At first painting directly from the figure to achieve luscious atmospheric works that feature mostly solitary women, O'Farrell now begins each painting without reference, allowing ideas and emotions to emerge from passages and transitions, finding the figure within the markings and brushstrokes.

In *Mother Daughter* (2008), two figures in perfect misalignment are connected by their oppositional stance and a painterly glare between them, resonant of steam or fog, that itself becomes the foreground. The two figures are contrasts in energy: one darker, tighter and drier, as if carved un-carefully from the atmosphere, the other splashed with raw pigment, slashed with line unrelated to volume, all about gesture and direction. Their stance toward one another is suggested with a few knowing highlights.

O'Farrell uses line much more descriptively, yet no less boldly, in *Offering* (2009), in which two figures emerge from agitated lines in contrasting colors. Their faces are cadmium red and

cartoon-like maze of one-way streets turning back into themselves, populated by animals and people busting through their days. In contrast, Jacob Sockness's black-and-white street map is rendered with a kind of clinical precision, suggesting abstract grids that are decorative as much as informational.

The central highlight of the exhibit was the large-scale reproduction of Mike Shine's *Shine Shack*, a giant custom-made home that Shine built in Bolinas, California. Simply rebuilding the shack inside of MOCFA's modest gallery space was a feat; turning the structure into an inviting space for visitors to engage the work transformed the project into more than a simple fetishism of crazy California cool. Outside, one can take in the wonderfully detailed inscriptions of text and colorful elements, as if surf- and skater-art had decided the house should be the next vehicle for West Coast youth travel. Inside Shine's shack are several retro chairs and tables, for visitors to sit and draw or read from the extensive



From top left: Simon Rodia, *Watts Towers* in Los Angeles, California, 1972. (Photo: Seymour Rosen.); Mike Shine, *Shine Shack*, Bolinas, California; Litto Damonte, *Hubcap Ranch* in Pope Valley, California; (Photo: Seymour Rosen.); Megan Wilson, *Home*, San Francisco, California, 1996-2008, at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco.

suggest new ideas of the personalized gallery and workspace, as well as democratic arenas for participatory living.

Combining elements from surf/skate culture, along with the low-fi era of the '60s, the original shack in Bolinas is not only a handmade, customized environment, but also a site of community

a zine, or to look more closely at the found and painted materials that make up the seaside, carnival-like shack: from upside skateboard decks functioning as shelves to painted driftwood.

In the front window space of the museum, Megan Wilson re-created a large section (or perhaps what one might call a "spatial excerpt") of her site-specific project *Home 1996-2008*, in which she re-designed and covered her entire home, from floor to ceiling in transformed aesthetic materials, from carpets to tiling, textile remnants to macramé, turning her domestic spaces into an ongoing work of sculptural installation. Here interior design becomes a lived practice, pushing beyond home decor to aesthetic traditions often dismissed as either domestic (i.e., feminine) and/or commercial. In the gallery's large window space, Wilson installed a number of re-fashioned items, transforming the space into a "total space," a kind of fantastic Pop Art counterpoint to Shine's more masculine, sporty cabin.

Finally, MOCFA invited Edgar Arceneaux to speak on behalf of the Watts House Project, an arts and cultural organization located in Los Angeles that uses the Watts Towers as a kind of touchstone for initiating local community arts projects that engage directly with housing and public policy issues to move art further out of the gallery and into the everyday built environments of the Watts neighborhood. Using the public program as part of a larger curatorial strategy helped expand the exhibition (from "inside to outside") into something more than just a display of historical artifacts and instead a set of questions for both art and folk(s).

—David Buuck

*Inside/Outside: Artist Environments* closed May 24 at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco.

David Buuck is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.