



THE ARTS, POST-9/11

Art community painting a very different picture

By Robert Taylor
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LIKE MUCH of American society, the art world endured the immediate shock, eventually returned to creative work, and now awaits the anniversary of last September's attacks. But predicting the long-term effect on art and artists is another matter. To borrow a centuries-old Latin expression, *"Ars longa, vita brevis"* — art is long, life is short.

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Still, there are some common themes. Bay Area museums have been more devoted to serving their communities, and attendance has often soared. Many artists feel an urgency to create works from the heart. Artists and arts groups are uncertain about their financial future in an unpredictable economy with new demands for services.

"I think the art world has changed. I think the way we think about art has changed," says Neal Benezra, the East Bay native who became director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last month.

"The events of last September really marked the end of the '90s," he says. "At least in the art world, there had been a lot of interest in works that had a strong basis in irony or cynicism. I think the taste for that work has changed on the part of collectors, audiences and museumgoers."

What is back in style? Humanism.

Like many museums across the country, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will take part Wednesday (when it would normally be closed) in "Celebrate America's Freedoms: A Day of Remembrance." Organized by the American Association of Museums, the event celebrates not only "freedom from fear" but "freedom to create" and "freedom to express ideas."

Has the role of museums changed in the past year? Benezra believes that museums have reaffirmed a commitment to their communities' needs, but not as an escape from reality. "I would never think of a modern, contemporary

museum as a refuge — not that we can't provide refuge," he says. "We don't want to be separated from the real world. At the same time, we want to provide a place where visitors can enjoy a quiet, thoughtful and at times solitary experience."

"Community involvement is not something that is new to us," says Carrie Lederer, curator of the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek's Dean Lesher Regional Center for the Arts. The events of last September have heightened the gallery's involvement not just in community art, but also in establishing a sense of community.

Lederer is currently asking artists to create works on traditional Japanese "shikishi" laminated boards, and she hopes hundreds can go on display in November. "They will mark the end of this very extraordinary year," she says, "and they can reflect what we value and why."

Another overview comes from Marnie Burke de Guzman, a scholar at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union and director of audience development at the UC Berkeley Art Museum.

"Sept. 11 was a kind of 'coming out' moment for museums to embrace their social functions," de Guzman says. "There were even big advertisements for New York museums, quite moving invitations that said, 'use this place to find peace.'"

"Whatever church you step into, it's a singular world. Museums cross religious, ethnic and class barriers," says de Guzman, who is studying the historic eras when church and art were synonymous. Now, she believes, museums are serving as spiritual gathering places. "I don't think 'secular temple' is a bad analogy," she says.

Many exhibits have taken on



LIVERMORE PAINTER Linda Ryan has revised her abstract art since Sept. 11, resulting in paintings she describes as "about human connectedness."

a more profound resonance since last September's attacks, even though they were planned long before. Visitors returned over and over to Sebastião Salgado's photographs of refugees and migrants at the Berkeley Art Museum.

The Bedford Gallery was in the midst of opening the photography show, "Linda McCartney's Sixties: Portrait of an Era," on Sept. 11. "There was a lot of sadness in people's hearts, reflecting on times that had passed, with yet another layer of tragedy," curator Lederer says. This year, the Bedford presented its first memorial exhibition, for Bay Area painter Wendy Sussman, and the mood of visitors gave it added resonance. "Somehow it all had a different tenor," Lederer says.

The Blackhawk Museum in Danville planned its current exhibit of American posters from World War II as a tribute to the "Greatest Generation" that fought the war.

Drawn from the Smithsonian, "Produce for Victory: Posters on the American Home Front" includes the now-famous image of a determined female war worker, captioned "We can do it!"

The museum's director, Dan Dunn, says the exhibit "seemed to take on a different life after September." The posters were designed to answer Americans' questions about the path they were asked to take during wartime. "There is also a very contemporary question," Dunn says. "The posters suggest a rallying of the population that the younger generation has not experienced."

One exhibition directly inspired by September's events is "State of Emergency: Disaster Response in California," opening Wednesday at the Oakland Museum of California. It includes 45 dramatic color photographs by Maggie Hallahan, who has

worked with the state's Office of Emergency Services covering events ranging from the 1991 Oakland Hills fire to the deployment of National Guard troops on Bay Area bridges last September.

Marcia Eymann, who organized the exhibition, is also the museum's curator of historical photography, and she was asked about coverage of the World Trade Center disaster. Which photographs will remain the most indelible decades from now?

"The images are still burning in people's minds — it really is incomprehensible in certain ways," Eymann says. Photographs of the explosion in the towers will surely live on, but Eymann also points to powerful personal images: firefighters carrying a priest from the site, and grieving at funerals.

Sometimes artists capture the essence of tragedy immediately, sometimes years later. Liz Keim, curator of media art at San Fran-

cisco's Exploratorium, has organized "Underground Zero," a program of independent filmmakers' response that will be shown Wednesday at the museum. Asked about artists' roles in making sense of such overwhelming tragedies, she takes a longer view.

Keim points to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, with its wall inscribed with the names of more than 58,000 Americans who died in the Vietnam War. It was designed by Maya Ying Lin when she was a 21-year-old architectural student at Harvard, and dedicated nearly a decade after the war ended. "It has been so embraced as a memorial," Keim says, "and ultimately it's of tremendous value."

Oakland artist Anna Marta Dostourian created a symbolic version of the World Trade Center towers with floating handmade paper for the traditional Day of the Dead exhibit in San Francisco last October. She is preparing another work for this year's event. "It is about what is essential to our identity — when we are literally face to face with death, what is at our core."

Dostourian, who is a social worker in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, says she feels an urgency about her art nowadays. "There is no time to waste any more."

Linda Ryan, a Livermore painter, shares those feelings. During the year after the September attacks, she has revised her painting style, adding figures to her abstract images, resulting in paintings that she describes as "about human connectedness." She says she feels more focused and determined, and that art has become "more about the good humans are capable of."

Berkeley photographer Richard Misrach says the terrorist attacks were traumatizing to him — on the morning of Sept. 11, he was opening an exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery near the White House. "For a couple of months, I felt really trivial in the face of that," he says. Since then, Misrach has completed a couple of projects that he calls "a very oblique response." Now he feels his life as an artist is pretty much back to normal: "Art is not more important than before. Art is not less important."