

SFMOMA COMMISSIONS LOCAL ARTISTS TO CREATE LARGE-SCALE WALL PROJECTS

Site-Specific Paintings from Twin Walls Mural Company, Muzae Sesay and Liz Hernández, Plus Photography-Based Artworks from Erina Alejo and Adrian L. Burrell to Enliven Museum Spaces

Museum Also Presents Timely Exhibition Featuring Bay Area Artists' Responses to the Pandemic



SAN FRANCISCO, CA (September 24, 2020; updated October 27, 2020)—Inspired by the long history of murals in the Bay Area and their resurgence during a period of ongoing crises, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is commissioning new large-scale wall projects by local artists as part of a series titled *Bay Area Walls*, an initiative that will enliven the museum's spaces with vibrant and timely new work and deepen its connections with the local artist community.

The commissions will include murals by Twin Walls Mural Company and Liz Hernández, two site-responsive paintings by Muzae Sesay and photo-based projects by Erina Alejo and Adrian L. Burrell that respond to the recent proliferation of exterior murals in San Francisco and Oakland. SFMOMA will also present *Close to Home: Creativity in Crisis*, an exhibition featuring seven local artists' responses to the pandemic. The first two projects, by Sesay and Twin Walls Mural Company, will be on view when the museum reopens to the public on October 4. *Close to Home* and the commissions by Alejo, Burrell and Hernández will open in December 2020.

“It is an honor for SFMOMA to offer a platform to local artists to create new work during a time of unprecedented and relentless crisis,” said Janet Bishop, Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA. “As the museum reopens its doors after six months of closure precipitated by the pandemic, it will be more focused than ever on strengthening our role within our immediate community. Each project in *Bay Area Walls* responds in brilliant, nuanced ways to the world in which we find ourselves, and demonstrates the capacity and necessity of art to reflect and shape a better future.”

MURALS AND PAINTINGS

Mural painting has a long history in San Francisco, which includes the significant works produced in the city by Diego Rivera in 1931, the first he made outside of Mexico. Several years later, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded the painting of murals to keep artists employed during the Great Depression, including those at Coit Tower, the Rincon Center and the Beach Chalet, among other locations. Not coincidentally, many of the WPA murals were painted by artists who assisted Rivera and were inspired by his work when he was in San Francisco. The tradition of mural painting in the city has continued for generations, particularly in the Mission District, where colorful celebrations of Latinx culture have long graced the walls of area buildings. During the recent months of sheltering in place, when closed urban businesses have boarded up their windows to prevent vandalism, mural painting has had a renaissance, with dozens of large-scale paintings cropping up on shop fronts throughout the Bay Area. In the wake of George Floyd’s murder and renewed calls for racial equity locally, nationally and internationally, murals have taken on additional relevance as powerful visual expressions of pain, protest and calls-to-action.

SFMOMA’s wall commissions will anticipate the long-term installation of Diego Rivera’s monumental mural *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on the Continent*, more commonly known as *Pan American Unity* (1940), which will be on view in the museum’s free-to-visit Roberts Family Gallery starting in Spring 2021. *Pan American Unity*—the largest portable mural Rivera ever made—celebrates creativity between cultures and includes imagery from history, mythology and industry from across the North American continent. Rivera also incorporated topical events and people, as well as references to his previous murals and artworks. The works by contemporary local artists will be in dialogue with Rivera’s iconic masterwork, offering a unique opportunity to explore the history of the mural form and the social and political resonances that continue to this day.

Bay Area Walls began with the temporary exterior project *We Need an Anti-Racist, Transfeminist and Intersectional Museum* by Marcela Pardo Ariza and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Rivera on view during Summer 2020. The series will continue with commissions by Twin Walls Mural Company, Muzae Sesay, Liz Hernández, Erina Alejo and Adrian L. Burrell.



Twin Walls Mural Company

Elaine Chu and Marina Perez-Wong, both born in San Francisco in 1982, met at the School of the Arts (now Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts) in 1997 and began painting murals with Precita Eyes Muralists Association under the guidance of Susan Cervantes. Since forming Twin Walls Mural Company in 2013, Chu and Perez-Wong have designed and painted over 30 murals in the Bay Area and New York City.

Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams, their commission for SFMOMA, is a deeply personal project for the artists. The mural, which is over 46 feet long, was created on-site on the museum's fifth floor. Rich with symbolism, it focuses on healing and resiliency in response to the imbalance of our current world from COVID-19, generational trauma, pollution, inequality and Perez-Wong's ongoing battle with stage IV breast cancer. Using chakras, or symbols of energy centers throughout the body, as a focal point, the work foregrounds female empowerment, and is a call-to-action, a hope for the future and a statement of joy.

At the center of the mural is a cherry blossom tree, whose blossoms represent dreams and wishes coming to fruition, and whose trunk is decorated with *milagros*, or charms that assist in healing. The tree's strong roots anchor and connect to the earth, while its crown, shaped like a pair of human lungs, radiates with the power of breath and air. The vibrating circles behind the tree incorporate stenciled designs by women artists and healers who inspire Chu and Perez-Wong. On either side of the tree is water representing the ocean; at the bottom lay sunken slave ships, toppled monuments to colonizers, segments of a broken border fence and other fallen symbols of oppression. Dancing above the water are the figures of seven young girls, modeled after students from Oakland School of the Arts, alongside members of the Radical Monarchs—a social justice and self-empowerment organization for young girls of color—symbolizing freedom, triumph and resistance.

Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams was conceived and executed on-site by Twin Walls Mural Company with Priya Handa and Lisa Max, with additional contributions by Susan Cervantes, Cece Carpio and Nancy Pili, as part of *Bay Area Walls*, a series of commissions initiated in 2020.



Muzae Sesay

Oakland-based painter Muzae Sesay (b. 1989) has shown widely since 2015, with dozens of solo and group exhibitions in the Bay Area as well as additional presentations in Los Angeles, New York, London and Copenhagen. His most recent exhibitions include solo companion presentations at Pt.2 Gallery in Oakland and a group show at the San José Institute of Contemporary Art. He is a member of nure collective in Oakland and a former installation preparator at SFMOMA.

Sesay's richly chromatic, geometrically structured works deftly allude to history, community, personal experience and the world around us. Much of his work explores the formation and fragmentation of memory, identity and human connection in relationship to environments and architectural spaces real and imagined.

Located on SFMOMA's seventh floor, *Muzae Sesay: Cut Trees* consists of two paintings, each eight by six feet, bearing lush surfaces of oil, acrylic, oil pastel and other mediums. Titled *With Resilience, Far Too Long* and *With Roots, Far Too Deep*, the canvases are installed on black painted squares on either side of an aperture blocked by a chain-link fence that evokes the urban landscape.

The underlying structure of each canvas is informed by artist David Hammons's iconic red, green and black *African American Flag* (1990). Sesay's paintings build on the geometry and symbolism of the flag with images referencing the trees chopped down in his neighborhood that have captured his attention and informed his practice during shelter-in-place. With both gravitas and optimism, the new growth emerging from their stumps offers symbols of hope and resilience during a time period that has only become more fraught as the artist developed his commission in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the related social upheaval and heightened attention to racial injustice throughout the Bay Area and world. "Depictions of new leaves sprout vitality into the composition, persevering, and emerging from hostility," noted Sesay. "Hope surfaces as the subtle, central subject."

Liz Hernández

Liz Hernández (b. 1993) is a Mexico City–born artist based in Oakland who works primarily with topics related to her upbringing. Inspired by the magical realism movement in Latin America, she uses imagery from memories of living in Mexico City, adopting supernatural elements and symbolism to address modern-life subjects. Hernández's practice focuses on painting and ceramics, and most recently, murals. She has exhibited work in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles and Mexico City.

For her SFMOMA commission, *Conjuro para la sanación de nuestro futuro (A spell for the healing of our future)*, Hernández will create a mural inspired by symbols and icons from *milagros*, or miracle charms, which are often informally placed on the robes or shrines of saints in churches by Catholic devotees, to request help for an ailment or in gratitude for an answered prayer. Though she attended Catholic school, Hernández rejected the rigidity and patriarchy of the church and instead connected to spirituality through healing rituals and traditions passed down by her grandmother and the *iglesia popular*, or popular church, they attended in Mexico, led mostly by women. In her mural, Hernández will appropriate the *milagros* and bring forth symbols that reference our collective moment, including lungs that represent the air we breathe and our burning forests, and hands, now associated with infection, that remain powerful as they also nurture and answer the calls for mutual aid. The mural will serve as a call for help to a higher power for our community's health and future, and as a reminder that we are all connected.

PHOTO COMMISSIONS

SFMOMA is commissioning two local artists to create photo-based projects documenting the storefront murals that have been painted on boarded-up businesses in Oakland and San Francisco. Part of *Bay Area Walls*, the exhibition will open in December on the museum's third floor.

Erina Alejo

San Francisco–born and –raised Erina Alejo (b. 1991) is an artist, researcher and educator who works across time and place to construct archives on labor, displacement, family and communal history. They are a third-generation renter with family in San Francisco, documented through their long-term project, *A Hxstory of Renting* (2015–ongoing).

Alejo's SFMOMA commission, entitled *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, will explore the textures, cultural landmarks, objects and people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic along San Francisco's Mission Street which connects their home districts South of Market, Mission and Excelsior. In addition to capturing the vibrant murals and signage that have appeared on the boarded-up storefronts, this new series will include ethnographic interviews and portraits with shopkeepers and residents as an outgrowth of Alejo's previous work on gentrification and community resilience.

Adrian L. Burrell

Born and raised in Oakland, Adrian L. Burrell (b. 1990) is a storyteller who uses photography, film and site-specific installation to examine issues of race, class, gender and intergenerational dynamics. His work focuses on notions of kinship, diasporic narratives and the gaps between place and belonging. His series *Mama's Babies* (2015–ongoing) traces his family's history through slavery, the Great Migration, the crack era and the current displacement of Black people in Oakland through gentrification.

Burrell's SFMOMA commission, *It's After the End of the World, Don't You Know That Yet*, will use the murals painted on the boarded-up storefronts of Downtown Oakland, created in the wake of recent Black Lives Matter protests, to explore lineages of revolt in the face of racial oppression. Featuring his grandmother, mother and sister, the work will be a collective self-portrait that examines the normalized violence inflicted on Black lives in American society.

CLOSE TO HOME

Presented in the museum's third-floor photography galleries, the exhibition *Close to Home: Creativity in Crisis* will bring together the deeply personal responses of seven Bay Area artists—Carolyn Drake, Rodney Ewing, Andres Gonzalez, James Gouldthorpe, Klea McKenna, Tucker Nichols and Woody De Othello—to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shelter-in-place order. Some of their projects sprang from the profound curtailing of daily life: the disruption of routines and inaccessibility of studios or materials, the precarity of employment and the delicate balance of family needs and work obligations. Other artists chose to wrestle with the emotional impact of the virus, responding to overwhelming feelings of isolation, helplessness, anxiety and loss. On May 25, several months into the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis police, sparking a furious nationwide outcry against police brutality and systemic racism. The convergence of these crises prompted renewed self-inquiry about the role the artists envisioned for their own work: some looked inward and found solace in interiority, while others felt compelled to tackle the outside world head on.

Seen individually, the seven projects will demonstrate a startlingly wide range of artistic, emotional and political responses, a reminder of just how differently this moment of collective crisis has affected each of us. Taken

together, the work will emphasize the experience of this period as a shared wound and a communal grieving, and issues a call for empathy and understanding as well as connecting through art.

SUPPORT

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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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SFMOMA is dedicated to making the art of our time a vital and meaningful part of public life. Founded in 1935 as the first West Coast museum devoted to modern and contemporary art, a thoroughly transformed SFMOMA, with triple the gallery space, an enhanced education center and new free public galleries, opened to the public on May 14, 2016.

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Twin Walls Mural Company, *Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams*, 2020 (in process); commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artists; photo: Katherine Du Tiel, courtesy SFMOMA

Twin Walls Mural Company, *Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams*, 2020 (installation view, SFMOMA); commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artists; photo: Katherine Du Tiel, courtesy SFMOMA

Muzae Sesay in front of his commission *Cut Trees*, 2020 (detail); commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artist; photo: Katherine Du Tiel, courtesy SFMOMA