

International Orange: 15 artists respond to the Golden Gate Bridge

By Alyson Kuhn
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The Golden Gate Bridge opened to traffic on May 27, 1937. The *International Orange* exhibition — named after the bridge's original paint color — opened 75 years later, on May 25, 2012. *International Orange* is inside Fort Point, a Civil War-era fort literally in the shadow of the San Francisco side of the bridge. Sixty thousand visitors enjoyed the show in its first nine weeks, including me. In a minute, I will rave about the projects of three artists whose primary material is ... paper: life-sized paper gowns, a boutique where everything is International Orange and nothing is for sale, and a fact-packed magazine called *Average*. All extraordinary.

Fort Point is gigantic, historic and not climate-controlled. It is usually windy and frequently foggy at this edge of the continent. The ambiance is intense — and this is part of what thrilled project curator Cheryl Haines about developing the exhibition here. Haines is the founding executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation, whose tagline is “Art about place.” We chatted with Haines and Marnie Burke de Guzman, managing project director, about this massive undertaking.

Can we start by talking about this location, location, location?

Marnie Burke de Guzman: Many people who have lived in San Francisco forever have never been inside Fort Point. FOR-SITE's goal is to have the art really underscore the history of any place we do an installation. The fort has been open on the weekend for many years, but most people have no idea what's inside. There had never been a major contemporary art show here until now. As a result of this show, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy obtained funding to keep the fort open all week, which makes it so much easier for people to visit.



The show's rack card (4 x 9 in.) is available for 45¢. The stamp of the bridge under construction (from the 1998 Celebrate the Century series) is perfect. The little orange 1937 motor car (2002 Antique Toys issue) begs to come along. O, these reinforcements make perfect O's. Photo: © 2012 Studio Alex.





Fiesta Queens by paper artist Anandamayi Arnold: Seven paper dresses pay homage to the real-life Fiesta Queens of 1937, who represented each of the six counties that contributed funds to build the bridge. Arnold, surely Queen of Crepe Paper, added a seventh dress honoring the bridge itself.

Cheryl Haines: I really wanted to showcase artists whose ideologies are quite diverse, whose sense of materiality is distinctive and different from one another. We also needed to be sure each artist could address a site that is so rich historically but also challenging, with restrictions around issues of historical preservation and harshness of climate. The resulting exhibition contains works in a wide variety of media — photography, videography, sound, and both found and fabricated objects.



San Francisco's bodice features a phoenix rising from the ashes of the 1906 earthquake and fire. Marin County's skirt (rear) features sunshine at the end of the tunnel just north of the bridge, the psychological gateway to Marin.

How did you select the artists for the exhibition?

CH: I've been involved in the art world for almost 30 years, so I'm aware of who's working out there, and what they are about. For example, Anandamayi Arnold had worked with Allison Smith — who did the bunting — on a "peddler project" I'd seen. Anandamayi wore an incredible dress she'd made and peddled balloons. For the opening of the bridge in 1937, among the dominant presences were the Fiesta Queens, one from each county that had contributed money to build the bridge.



Bodice detail from Anandamayi Arnold's dress evoking the Golden Gate Bridge. The front of the skirt (not visible) is a lovely seascape, with a zeppelin hovering in the blue sky. Cheryl Haines comments that Arnold's dresses introduce an element of domesticity.

MBdG: Each artist received a materials fee and a stipend from the FOR-SITE Foundation. The artists retain ownership of their works; some of them are already responding to inquiries from museums and collectors interested in acquiring their work from the show. The opportunity to create new work about a place does not come along very often. If an artist sells a piece from the exhibition, whether to a museum or to an individual collector, the FOR-SITE Foundation will be reimbursed for the cost of creating the work.



Conceptual artist Stephanie Syjuco's pop-up shop is all pop and no shop. She named her installation *The International Orange Commemorative Store (A Proposition)*.



The desk in Stephanie Syjuco's one-color economy.

Do you share my pain at not being able to buy anything in Stephanie Syjuco's shop, which I think of as International Orangemania?

MBdG: You are not alone! Many visitors have expressed surprise and disappointment. Initially, we did hope to sell merchandise — but park regulations are such that you cannot. As a result, I think that Stephanie's installation provides a more provocative experience. It makes a statement about our acquisitive nature, and whether it's possible to contain something as profound as the bridge in a banal object.

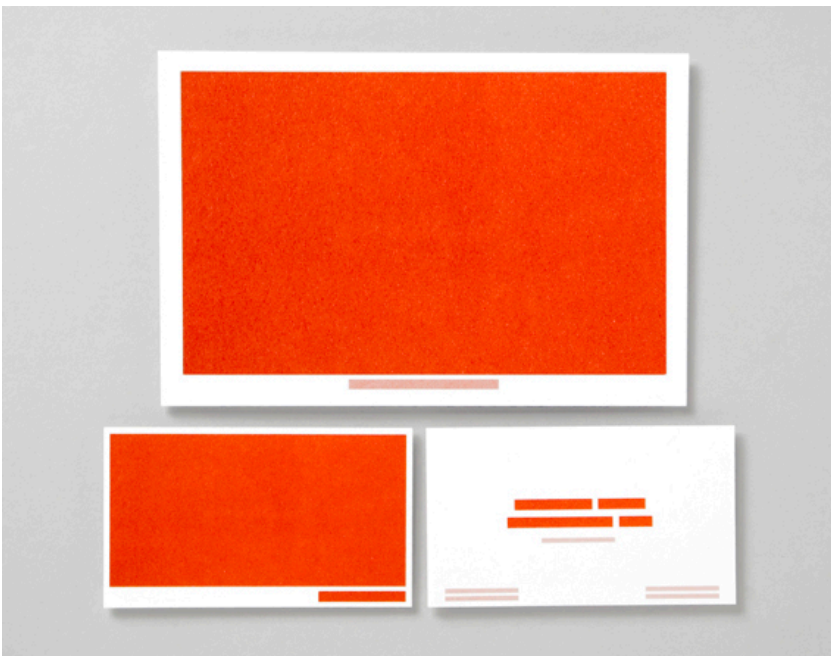
CH: However, it's worth noting that the permanent on-site souvenir shop inside the fort is doing very brisk business. Their sales are up 100% over the same period last year.



Stephanie Syjuco explores the notion of commerce within a cultural institution. Curator Cheryl Haines asks, "Does buying a memento become the most memorable part of the experience?" Um, well, we are dotty for these desk accessories.



Pick a card, any card, and you may take it for free.



Free post card and double-sided business card from Stephanie Syjuco's installation. I would love to buy a big post card of her entire shop. Photo: © 2012 StudioAlex.

I wonder whether a significant number of visitors just “happen upon” the show.

CH: Absolutely! Many of them are people who are out with their children or walking their dog, and they come upon the exhibition. I love curating in the public realm! This isn't for a pre-selected audience. It's not a museum or a gallery, where you have to pay or make a special effort to seek it out. This project hopefully engages the public in a way that art isolated from the everyday cannot. We have also, however, had some high praise from regional curators and museum directors as well as from “regular folk.”



Kate Pocrass calls the Golden Gate Edition of *Average* a field guide. It's also a treasure trove of interviews.

A RETIRED TOLL TAKER AT HOME *on a Tuesday afternoon*

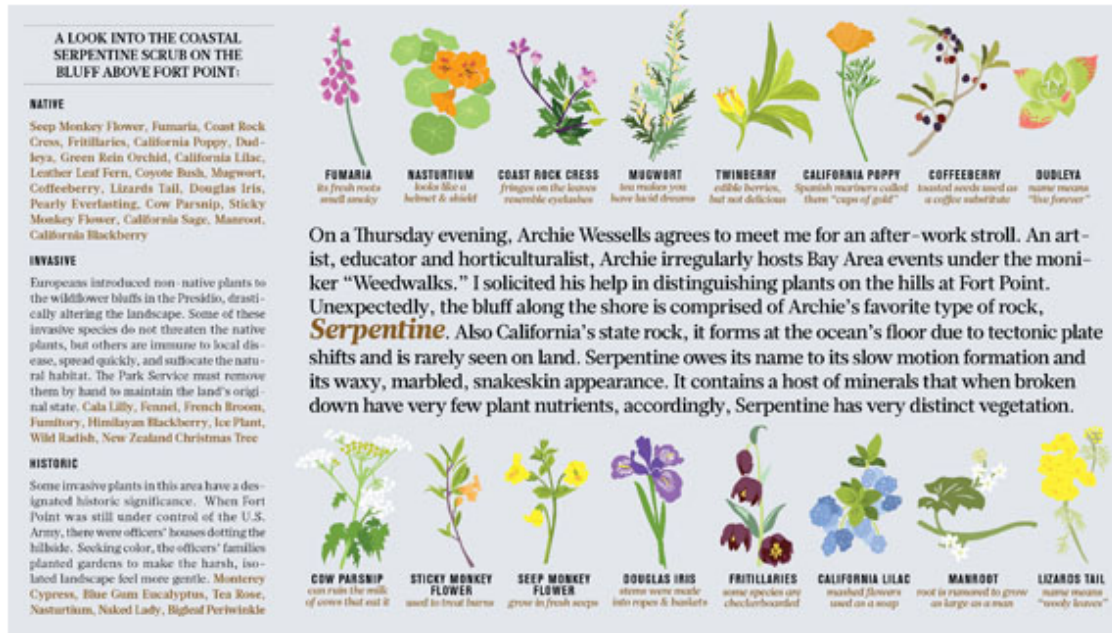
In May 1980, Maureen Ewing drove through a tollbooth at the Golden Gate Bridge and candidly asked how she could go about getting a job as a bridge toll taker. Little did Maureen know, but her timing was remarkable. Interviews at the Golden Gate Bridge Transit Authority were rarely conducted but, as luck would have it, the Transit Authority was accepting applications the very next week. Maureen applied, and then she interviewed at a long conference table in an imposing boardroom with numerous staff members. Eventually her name was added to the Transit Authority's “list of people to call if a position became available.” About one year later, when that call came, it caught Maureen off guard. Since her interview, she had started a cleaning business and was hesitant to switch gears into a new profession, so she politely declined the offer. Later that evening while having dinner with her father, Maureen casually mentioned the Transit Authority's job offer. Maureen's father had worked for the San Francisco Fire Department for 30 years followed by 10 years as a state fire marshal. Her civic-minded father encouraged her to reconsider her decision to decline the job offer; he asked her, “Don't you want to be a part of something?” On the way home from this dinner, Maureen realized her father was right. The job with the Transit Authority on the Golden Gate Bridge would mean a union job with benefits, vacation time, and, most importantly, a community. The next morning she called the Transit Authority to rescind her refusal and accept the job; but the job had already been given away to another candidate. Two weeks later, she was surprised to learn that the Transit Authority wanted to hire her to fill an additional opening. And thus began her 30-year career as a toll taker.



Over the years, if a driver paid the fare with a silver coin, Maureen gave the appropriate change from her own pocket in order to keep the silver. On one occasion, she was handed two silver dollars dated 1896 & 1924.

Pocrass' interview with retired toll taker Maureen Ewing continues for two more pages, with a marvelous photo of Maureen in her uniform in her toll booth. Maureen talks about fare changes, paying it forward (paying the toll for the vehicle behind you), the advent of cell phones and much more.

MBdG: We are so pleased that it is resonating with people. This is FOR-SITE's largest project to date and a very ambitious undertaking. We also wanted to do a major interpretive piece. The website [www.international-orange.org] includes a video with each artist, providing a window into their creative approaches and processes, and capturing a wide-ranging vista of the Golden Gate at this milestone.



On the last page of *Average*, Pocrass illustrates her after-work stroll with artist/educator/horticulturalist Archie Wessells.

CH: As people continue to redefine what documentation is, and how to reach out and inform people of things, social media has become an increasingly important part of the conversation. This virtual banter, if you will, extends both visitorship and the life of the project. On the exhibition's Facebook page, people can share photos of their own experiences at *International Orange*.

International Orange is organized by the FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service. The exhibition is open daily until Oct. 28, 2012. Current hours are 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Except as noted, all photos courtesy of FOR-SITE Foundation and the artists.