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A Bridge's Golden Years

By Carol Kino
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Abelardo Morell's "Vertigo" (2012)

WHEN it opened on May 27, 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge was an engineering and economic marvel linking California's northern counties with the rest of the state. But within a few years it was something more: a universally recognized symbol, the romantic embodiment of the City by the Bay.
And now it is also the focus of "International Orange," a show made up of site-specific projects by 16 artists commissioned for the bridge's 75th anniversary. Installed in and around Fort Point, the Civil War-era military stronghold that anchors the San Francisco side of the bridge, the show runs through Oct. 28.

The exhibition, named for the bridge's paint color, is the work of the San Francisco-based For-Site Foundation, which describes itself as promoting "art about place." After mounting three projects in three years in the nearby Presidio, the group's founder, Cheryl Haines, happened upon the fort and realized she had never been inside. As she explored its Escher-like maze of vaulted hallways and rooms housing historical exhibits, Ms. Haines said, she became "spellbound." She soon decided it was an ideal locale for For-Site's next project.

Although many of the artists are internationally known, like Mark Dion, Pae White and Cornelia Parker, most have close ties to the area. And though they were all dealing with a very familiar landmark, their works turned out to be surprisingly varied.

Doug Hall's video focuses on the bridge's monumental architecture and the container ships that pass below, while David Littschwager's photographs reveal the microscopic ecosystems in the seawater. Stephanie Syjuco created a souvenir stand with orange postcards, key chains and the like, none of it for sale. And Allison Smith has festooned the fort with ceremonial bunting, which, instead of the traditional red, white and blue, is in oranges that suggest a more modern-day concern: the color-coded Homeland Security alert system.

In many ways the extremes — past and present, fact and fiction — may be the most alluring aspect of the project. "It's really hard to work on a historic site," Ms. Haines said, "because people are used to it being a certain way. But when you encounter all these interventions, it completely shifts your ideas about history."

Abelardo Morell

'Vertigo,' 2012

Abelardo Morell, 63, created his first camera obscura photograph in 1991. Using a window of his Boston home as the aperture, he projected the house across the street into his living room, then captured the surreal scene on film.

Although the concept for the device — the precursor of the modern camera — goes back to Aristotle, Mr. Morell had never seen its effects photographed. "That's why," he said, "I felt I had invented photography."

Since then he has become something of an expert at creating variations on the device, which essentially mimics the action of the human eye by using a pinhole in a darkened room to cast an inverted image on the wall. (He adds lenses to focus and intensify images.) And when offered the chance to make a camera obscura using the windows of Fort Point, Mr. Morell leapt at it. "The challenge of making an interesting picture of the Golden Gate Bridge is huge," he said. "There are a billion photographs of it, and it's such a gorgeous thing that it's hard to make it new."

Unlike most of Mr. Morell's camera obscuras, which are typically made only to create a photograph, the one pictured here was conceived as an installation — one that invites viewers to step inside the camera, which produces ever-changing images of the bridge. It is named for the artist's favorite film, the 1958 Alfred Hitchcock classic "Vertigo," and was inspired by the scene in which Kim Novak throws herself into the bay from Fort Point. To create it Mr. Morell used a window in the fort that looks out onto the same spot.

"To make a camera obscura where Kim Novak jumped is very thrilling," Mr. Morell said. And though he could easily have turned the resulting image right side up, he added, "In this case I wanted it upside down, to add to the sense of vertigo."

Anandamayi Arnold

'Fiesta Queens (Golden Gate Bridge dress),' 2012

Anandamayi Arnold favors an unusual material in her art: heavyweight German crepe paper. She has used it to create an elaborate Marie Antoinette-style wig, an immense Pacific bluefin tuna and old-fashioned surprise balls shaped like iris bulbs and tiger heads.

And now it has helped her conjure up the dresses of the fiesta queens sent by counties around the state to the bridge's opening in 1937. When she saw them in a photograph, Ms. Arnold, 37, was taken by their matching gowns with ruffled hoop skirts and puffed sleeves. "There's

Anandamayi Arnold's "Fiesta Queens (Golden Gate Bridge dress)" (2012)

the drama I've been looking for," she recalled thinking.

Ms. Arnold has made seven dresses, one for each of the counties that helped finance the bridge, and one for the bridge itself. Working with little but crepe paper, thread, glue and cloth backing for the bodices, she has maintained the original silhouette, while using the colors and the collaged front panel of each dress to "riff on the different regions," she said.

For Del Norte County, whose motto is "Where the redwoods meet the sea," she fashioned ruffles in oceanic tones of blue and green, while San Francisco is represented by a phoenix, rising from a modern-day skyline.

The bridge dress, shown here, does not depict the Golden Gate itself, but a view from it, looking inland toward Alcatraz, with Mount Diablo in the far distance. At the neckline there's a tiny locket with a picture of Joseph Strauss, the entrepreneur who brought the project to fruition.

Andy Freeberg

'Phillip Chaney' from the series 'The Gatekeepers,' 2012

Andy Freeberg's 'Phillip Chaney' from the series 'The Gatekeepers' (2012)

The Marin photographer Andy Freeberg is known for pictures of art dealers and Chelsea gallery reception desks. But this time he turned his camera on another kind of gatekeeper: the employees who maintain and patrol the bridge. "It's something I drive over to go anywhere," Mr. Freeberg, 54, said. "But you don't really see the unsung heroes who make it happen."

He photographed a little more than half of the 200-member bridge staff, from workers who set out traffic cones to the chief of security, and narrowed the group down to the 30 on view, aiming to reflect their diversity. "This organization is very integrated," he said. "It really reflects the population of the Bay Area." Many of the supervisors pictured are Chicano, female or African-American — a far cry, he noted, from the situation 75 years ago.

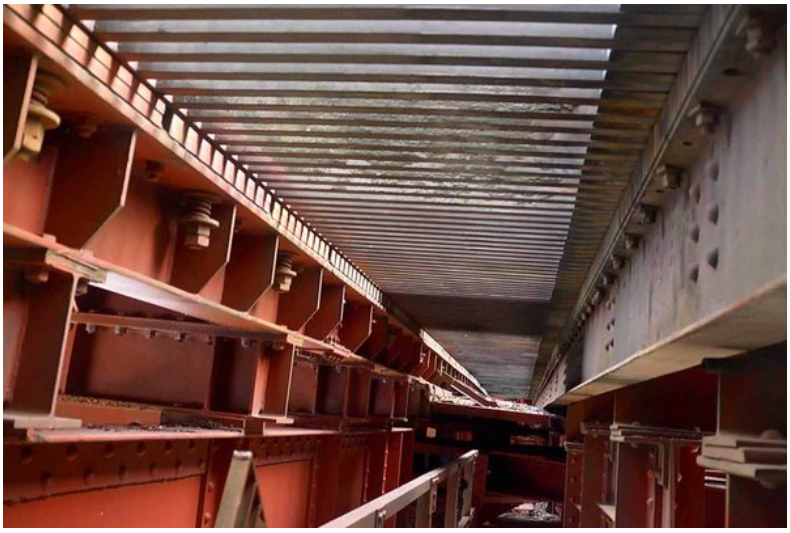
Throughout, Mr. Freeberg aimed to capture details that in future years may make the pictures look historical — like the earrings worn by two young lane workers, or the signs on the tollbooths, soon to be replaced by an automated system. But his goal was just to make great pictures. The one here shows Phillip Chaney, the superintendent of ironworkers and operating engineers, standing beneath the bridge high above the water.

To get the shot, which was Mr. Chaney's idea, the two climbed down a hidden ladder. The photographer balanced on a strut set over a scaffold while his subject, tethered with a safety harness, coolly made his way out on a separate strut.

"It was exciting," Mr. Freeberg said. "I realized I was in a spot that I hadn't seen a picture of before."

Bill Fontana

'Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge,' 2012



A still from Bill Fontana's "Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge" (2012)

For most of his four-decade career the sound sculptor Bill Fontana has transformed bridges and other structures into musical instruments. He did it for the Brooklyn Bridge and the Millennium Bridge in London, and for the golden anniversary of the Golden Gate, using microphones to create a duet between the bridge and the birds on the nearby Farallon Islands that was transmitted by broadcast-quality telephone lines to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"I became really familiar with the structure," Mr. Fontana said, "and I had 25 years to think about what I would do if I went back."

For the anniversary he has created a sound sculpture that incorporates his first live video feed. After scouring the bridge's underbelly, he positioned his camera below the expansion joint at the South Tower, capturing a view that flickers with light and shadow as cars pass overhead. "If the Golden Gate Bridge had a brain, these would be its synapses firing," Mr. Fontana said.

A microphone and accelerometers, or vibration sensors, pick up the percussive clack of tires and the bell-like tones of vibrating metal. Other microphones capture foghorns, sea gulls and breaking waves, while fiber-optic cables and a microwave transmitter channel the symphony into a room at Fort Point.

Does Mr. Fontana, now 65, plan to participate in the bridge's 100th anniversary? "If I'm still able to walk and climb down a ladder," he said.