

# Feel the Force

BY GARY SINGH

San Francisco's diverse and exciting public art programs showcase extraordinary works

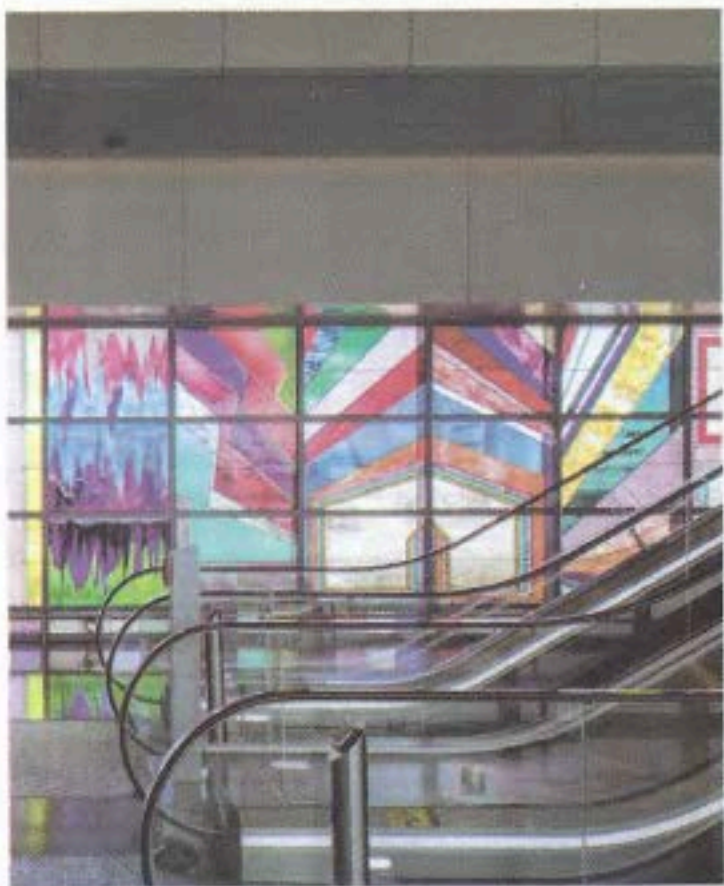


Photo by Jeff McInane

Sarah Cain, *We Will Walk Right Up to the Sun*, © 2019. Stained glass, installed in the SFO Grand Hyatt Hotel Air Train Station. Collection of the City and County of San Francisco.



Liz Glynn, Terra-Techne, © 2019. Cast stainless steel and terra cotta; departures Lobby Harvey Milk Terminal 1, SFO. Collection of the City and County of San Francisco.

Harmonious tensions between complementary forces characterize a variety of new public art in San Francisco. In each case, viewers become participants by interpreting how the natural environment interlaces with the manmade or how the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm.

The Great Meadow at Fort Mason, for instance, already presents one of the city's most iconic views. Eucalyptus, pine and cypress trees overlook the Golden Gate Bridge while sporadic sailboats dot the water like specks in the distance. The robust history of Fort Mason easily befits two large-scale sculptures by Guiseppe Penone.

"Fort Mason has a strong character," Penone said. "It's an austere and unadorned park where the original military spirit can still be felt, in a splendid location in front of the bay and the Golden Gate. It's a place that demands dialogue with artworks that reveal and enhance the potential drama of its former function."

Installed through October 25, each sculpture is a tree cast in bronze yet combined with natural tree-like elements. *Idee di pietra* (2004) presents a narrow leafless tree reaching for the sky, but one whose branches are weighed down with large unwieldy boulders that seem to defy gravity. With *La logica del vegetale* (2012), we see a gigantic uprooted tree toppled over on its side with scraggy branches reaching out toward five native saplings that grow upright from the meadow grass – a valley oak, a coast live oak, a bigleaf maple, and two California bay laurels. Penone chose both sculptures in response to the immediate landscape.

"The two works that I have installed are a reflection on sculpture and on nature, the tree as a perfect sculpture, a being that fossilizes its own existence in its form," Penone said, noting that the contrast between a tree's vital verticality and how it eludes horizontality – the force of gravity imposed on every form of life – is the first and most fundamental consideration in every sculpture. "This tension is present in the park," he added, "which, with its wide open spaces, was an exemplary setting for the works installed."

Fifteen miles south of Fort Mason, at San Francisco International Airport – a facility technically part of the city, not the port, thus falling under the Art Enrichment Ordinance – even more contemporary art continues to emerge. As endless airport construction forges ahead, so do public spaces allocated for new site-specific works.

"Over the years they have realized that the art is really an asset to the passenger experience," said Susan Pontious, Arts Commission's Civic Art Collection and Public Art Program Director. "And they've incorporated the art program – both the exhibitions and the permanent acquisition – into their business plan. ... So we began working in terms of identifying sites for art at the very, very earliest design, how it's going to be incorporated, where it's going to be incorporated."

Phase one of the new Harvey Milk Terminal 1 debuted last July, including a new Liz Glynn installation, *Terra-Techne*, floating above the departures lobby. Cast from stainless steel and terra cotta, *Terra-Techne* displays a landscape of California biomes on its underside and abstract silicon chip designs on its top side, juxtaposing the natural world with the manmade world.

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Giuseppe Penone, *La logica del vegetale (The Logic of the Vegetal)*, 2012  
Bronze and river stones. Bronze tree dimensions: 59 1/8 x 393 3/4 x 669 3/8 in  
150 cm x 1000 x 17001. Installation view, Fort Mason, San Francisco, 2019

Other scenarios are even more elaborate. Sarah Cain created *We Will Walk Right Up To The Sun*, a vivid 150-foot-long stained glass installation with 270 different colors running along a new AirTrain platform that gives way to the new Grand Hyatt at SFO. San Francisco-based artist Johanna Grawunder likewise transformed the side of a brand new parking garage into a site-specific artwork, *Coding*, made of computer-controlled LEDs, diffuser panels, glass and painted steel.

The collections at SFO are treated seriously. That is, the airport didn't situate the artwork right next to wall-size real estate ads or statistics about convention business.



"At our airport, there really is a continuous experience of art throughout the airport, whether it's the permanent art collection or the temporary exhibits," Pontious said. "And it's separate from the other advertising and the commercial zones. And that makes a huge difference."

And speaking of construction, at Fourth and Brannan, right before the upcoming T Third Street Metro line extension goes underground heading toward the Yerba Buena Center and eventually Chinatown, one finds Moto Ohtake's sculpture, *Microcosmic*, already rising from the station platform. A wind-activated kinetic sculpture fabricated from stainless steel and mounted on a 40-foot pole, *Microcosmic* features two wings that move in circular gyroscopic fashion. Depending on what the wind is doing, the wings might rotate in opposite directions under the same chaotic weather patterns.

Originally from Tokyo, Ohtake received his MFA in sculpture from the San Francisco Art Institute and now teaches at De Anza College in Cupertino. With the sculpture, Ohtake pays tribute to the city of San Francisco where he used to live, a place he sees as a diverse microcosm, while also sourcing inspiration from a fusion of opposites. Once again, nature collides with the built environment.

"By combining opposing images, I find it interesting that I can present two different ideas at the same time," Ohtake said. "I would see my kinetic structure as being manmade – there's a structural order there – but when the piece gets involved with the wind, which is created by nature, the motion becomes very organic, very unpredictable so that within one piece I can see both aspects."



*Microcosmic*, by Bay Area-based artist Moto Ohtake, is a wind-activated kinetic sculpture mounted on a 40-foot light pole at the 4th and Brannan Street Platform Station, right before the train goes underground. The sculpture has 31 rotating points, which allows it to interact with the environment by responding to San Francisco's variable wind conditions.

Back over at Fort Mason, Penone's work orchestrates a similar relationship of opposing forces, in this case, an interplay, an incommensurability, between the temporal and the stationary, between progress and stagnation. The viewer observes a static work, but also becomes aware of the impermanence of time.

"In both works there are elements of precariousness," Penone said. "Such as the stones suspended between the tree's branches in *Idee di pietra* or the growth of the five trees in *La logica del vegetale* which are opposed to the stability and the durability of the bronze that makes up the form and the color of the trees."