

## “SAN FRANCISCO PLAYS ITSELF”

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SF CAMERAWORKS

by matt sussman

**SAN FRANCISCO** San Francisco has never been camera shy. Its reputation as perhaps the most photogenic of American cities has been confirmed by the endless representation of its most famous sites and unique topography in popular films, postcards and vacation photos. Even in ruins—as evidenced by the many photographs of buildings toppled by the 1906 earthquake, before which gawkers stand stiffly in their Sunday best—San Francisco cannot help but strike a pose.

“San Francisco Plays Itself,” the first of the two-part “An Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area” show marking the 35th anniversary of the nonprofit exhibition and education venue SF Cameraworks [the second, “The Future Lasts a Long Time,” opens Jan. 7], does what it can to unfix the San Francisco we already know. It does so by opposing the picturesque—which is to say, it takes things personally. Divided into three sections—perspectives, figures and actions—“SF Plays Itself” presents a collective photographic portrait by some 30 photographers of the city from 1974 to now, as represented by its UPS workers, drag queens, street people and political activists. It also makes use of the photographers’ words; all have written brief wall texts about their experience of the Bay Area. (Photo selections were made in conversation between the artists and curator Chuck Mobley.)

After so many exhibitions in which the didactics run roughshod over the art, it was refreshing to learn about the artists’ own investment in their work. Subjects are revealed to be friends (as in Catherine Opie’s shot of the late drag terrorist Jerome Caja, hung in humorous proximity to Larry Sultan’s giant, Jacques-Louis David-esque portrait of socialite Denise Hale) and family (Michael Jang’s candid late ’70s snaps of his relatives, which capture three generations’ varied experiences of assimilation) as well as strangers (Alice Shaw’s series of portraits of people with whom she shares a single physical characteristic).

Despite the exhibition’s individual emphasis, it’s hard not to look at the photographs through the larger lens of history. One sees in Jim Goldberg’s stark portraits of the well-off and the destitute from the late ’70s, as well as in Chauncey Hare’s series of white-collar drones at work from the same time, early signs of the gentrification that San Francisco was to undergo in the ’80s. Judy Dater’s and Richard Misrach’s photographs point to the city’s continued struggles with its homeless population. The personal and the historical collide in Dan Nicoletta’s work, represented by his 1977 portrait of Harvey Milk in front of Milk’s camera store, hung next to Nicoletta’s recent behind-the-scenes photographs shot during the filming of *Milk*, in which Sean Penn played the slain gay rights pioneer. But as “San Francisco Plays Itself” proves, Hollywood won’t have the last word on our town.

*Photo: Alice Shaw: Phil + Me, from the series “People Who Look Like Me,” 1999-2004, color photograph, 20 by 24 inches; in “San Francisco Plays Itself,” at SF Cameraworks.*

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