

Vogel, Traci. "Gray Area's new gallery hopes to cast light on an underserved neighborhood" LA Weekly, Oct 21, 2009



Gray Area's new gallery hopes to cast light on an underserved neighborhood

Traci Vogel, Oct 21, 2009

The Tenderloin has long been a gray area, famous for its unsolved crimes, foggy demographics, and wayward tourists. The reinvention of the neighborhood's central avenue, Taylor Street, as an arts district seemed likely to languish with other failed attempts at improvement until last year, when Josette Melchor took up the offer to move her SOMA gallery northward.

For Melchor, uprooting was no easy choice; her former gallery had thrived on small but well-attended events in its spot above the DNA Lounge. When the Entertainment Commission came to her with grant money to help fund her relocation, her first thought was, "Why would I move my community to the Tenderloin?"

What changed her mind was cold, hard data. In conducting research and focus groups, Melchor discovered some facts about the Tenderloin that surprised her — among them, that the neighborhood houses the city's highest density of families and children, along with its highest density of social services. Her new 4,000-square-foot arts center, Gray Area Foundation for the Arts, opened on Oct. 1 with a show that uses data as a starting point for art and social activism.

It's not as dry as it sounds. The visual interpretation of data finds its most popular form these days in Google Maps, and the works on display from Stamen Design are similar. There are Stamen maps that show, for example, the locations of all the trees in the Tenderloin, all the rental listings, and all the crime reports during a period of time. In the Stamen Map Room upstairs, acetate printouts of the maps hang in the windows, and browsers can peruse "documents of inspiration," news stories and photographs that give detail to the data.

Artist C.E.B. Reas is more interested in data's aesthetic applications than its practical ones. Reas, an associate professor at UCLA, is the inventor of a programming language called Processing, which he uses to set parameters for visual shapes and movement. He shows two videos here, blooming and branching shapes based on randomly generated algorithms. The videos, while hypnotic, will seem disappointingly familiar to anyone who has accidentally combined the YouTube search terms "meditation" and "fractal."

I found Reas' prints more compelling. Formed via a similar algorithm, but reined in by a limited color palette, they are deeply ambiguous abstract images that beg comparisons. Process 11 (Image 1) appears to reinvent a Jackson Pollock drip painting, with black, white, and gray swirls and calligraphic strokes. Process 8 (Image 1) looks almost like a negative: Blasts of overexposed white polyps dance across a black field. And in Process 14 (Image 4), pink and gray tendrils on a white background look alternately like flowers or flesh.

A space in the gallery's front window will showcase rotating video work, much of it interactive. For "Open," artist Camille Utterback filmed her explorations of the Tenderloin. The street scenes, played back on a large screen, break up into ripples as viewers walk in front of them.

The piece is arresting, especially at night (it plays 24/7), and it speaks to questions about how the Tenderloin is transforming.

Melchor sees Gray Area's gallery as a resource for engagement with the neighborhood. To her, data means knowledge and transparency; the more easily it's disseminated, the more empowered people are. A gray area is by definition undefined. It's "open to different meanings," she says. "That allows people to define it — it can be anything you want." There's always the danger that some people will be marginalized completely out of the definition, but with open workshops, a media lab, a fashion boutique, and a cafe, Melchor hopes to keep the data stream open to all.