

Arts

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'A Fragile Narrative' at SJICA

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'A Fragile Narrative' proves that glass is more than decor

May 28, 2015 by Gary Singh



LIVING IN A GLASS HOUSE: This piece from the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, serves as a metaphor for issues, such as rape, domestic abuse and miscarriage—topics that many fear to address directly.

Glass art rarely gets its due, in comparison to fiber, ceramics, clay and other sculptural methods. Most of the time, glass is relegated to utilitarian contexts or decorative shlock, which is why several galleries around town have curated glass-themed shows in conjunction with the Glass Art Society Conference hitting town in a few weeks. Everyone involved—both at the conference and gallery levels—is trying to shatter the idea that glass is simply decor.

At the **San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art**, for instance, "A Fragile Narrative" by Cassandra Straubing is a moving exploration, on multiple levels, incorporating glass with

other sculptural and conceptual elements. Straubing employs specific glass-forming techniques such as blowing, hot-sculpting and casting to create working-class garments and tools of the blue-collar experience. As a whole, the show sheds light on issues faced by migrant workers, single mothers and domestic laborers.

The titles of each "Fragile" piece hook the observer right away. For example, the most powerful work comes at us with this title: *There was a quiet stillness; her cradle unfilled; unable to move on*. An empty rocking chair sits in the middle of the room, surrounded by broken glass eggs, all signifying fertility, miscarriage and domestic abuse. You may choose whichever subject—or eggshell—to walk upon. Straubing has been working on the project for 10 years, but this is the first time a fully realized piece has been shown anywhere.

"I've been in this meditative process of glass-blowing these eggshells and talking about the storytelling of women's issues of miscarriage and rape and domestic violence—things that are not often talked about," Straubing says. "Things that are kept quiet and that we keep to ourselves because it's either embarrassing or we feel guilty or very sad."

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Since the broken eggshells are sitting on the gallery floor and not roped off, the eggs are wide open for anyone to accidentally step on. Just as most people are conditioned to sweep such subject matter under the rug and not talk about it, museum patrons will be apprehensive about walking on the physical eggshells. In that sense, the work is ingenious. Viewers are invited to see something that is clearly broken, but not explicitly invited to interact with it—just as society is conditioned to ignore women's issues like domestic abuse or miscarriage.

Another work on display features large hot-sculpted glass needles leaning up against one corner of the gallery. Red thread runs from the eyes of the needles down to the floor and then along the bottoms of the walls. Other works feature similarly glass-sculpted jeans or shirts, emblematic of the migrant worker experience. With each work in the show, the narrative title opens up the mystery right away. In this case, *They stood silent and graceful, awaiting the news* provides an entry point from which the observer can weave his or her way into the narrative.

"One of the things these titles do is they suggest things, but they don't give you the answer," Straubing says. "Or they leave enough open to the viewer so that the viewer can come to their own conclusion of the story."

On a macro level, "A Fragile Narrative" helps to shatter the illusion that glass art is mere decoration, utility or plain, mass-produced ornamentation. At the same time, the show builds multilayered narratives around the ignored people who built or settled California.

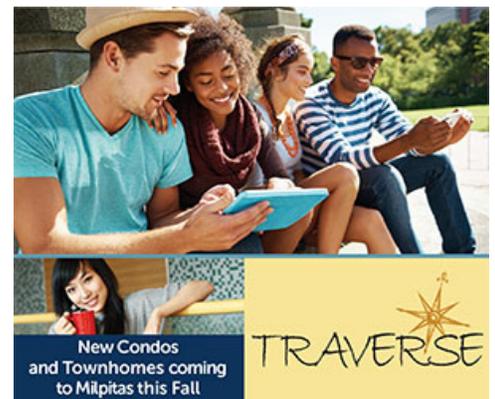
"It's the people we often don't give recognition to," Straubing says. "Especially in the Bay Area, we're known for Silicon Valley, Google CEOs and very well-known people, like Steve Jobs, but I'm more interested in talking about the people who've had just as much of an influence in this area but who don't have a name, or just have a number. They just have the overall mark of a migrant farm worker."

The exhibit's free opening reception will be held May 31 from 1pm to 4pm.

A Fragile Narrative

Thru Sep 12, Free

[San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#)



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