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SPOTLIGHT

San Francisco needs to save its art scene

Max Blue | Special to The Examiner

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SFMOMA was responsible for the worst exhibition of 2025 in San Francisco – a nightmarish celebration of the artist Kaws.

Craig Lee/The Examiner



This year has felt longer than most for San Francisco's art world. That's because it's part of a story that began all the way back in 2022, with a doom-and-gloom New York Times article painting the closure of two blue-chip Bay Area galleries as the death knell of the area's art scene.

There was a lot of pushback against that narrative from within the community, the health of which can't be easily defined by two galleries that garnered lots of outside attention.

On the ground, it felt like we were thriving. Three years later, it's hard to feel the same way.

In the last few months, five art galleries in San Francisco have closed or announced their closure. Four of them — Altman Siegel, Anglim Trimble, Jack Fischer and Rena Bransten — were located inside Minnesota Street Project, a consortium of galleries in the Dogpatch neighborhood. The fifth, Gallery 16, was in the South of Market area. While some of them will pivot to a pop-up model, they all cited the uneven contemporary-art market as a major contributing factor to their decisions to slash overhead.

While the commercial gallery business isn't the only signifier of an art scene's health, it's difficult not to feel discouraged by the contraction in the local market, especially when it coincides with other blows to The City's cultural significance.

Some galleries attempting to weather the market's downturn this year found creative ways to persist. Early in 2025, the first Karl art exhibition marked a major move for some of The City's smaller arts organizations. The cooperative of local galleries and nonprofits managed to pull off three shows in its Embarcadero space before moving to a new location a few blocks away that will open to the public in January.



SFMOMA's excellent Ruth Asawa retrospective was one of The City's best exhibitions of 2025.

Courtesy SFMOMA/HENRIK KAM PHOTOGRAPHY

Several local museums and nonprofit organizations felt the squeeze in May, when federal arts funding was slashed under President Donald Trump's second administration. Museums also continued struggling to meet pre-pandemic visitor numbers. We've seen this result in wildly uneven programming at The City's flagship museums, from exhibitions celebrating local art history to shows that feel oriented towards funneling tourists into the museum store.

SFMOMA was responsible for both of the best exhibitions of the year — an operatic Ruth Asawa retrospective and a charming ode to the San Francisco Art Institute. It was also responsible for the worst — a nightmarish celebration of Kaws.

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco — the public arts institution that comprises the de Young and the Legion of Honor — split the difference, with the de Young's Paul McCartney photographs and the Art of Manga looking like vacuous cash grabs compared to its staggering Isaac Julien survey and the Legion's celebration of the late local legend Wayne Thiebaud.



After nearly six months of maintenance renovations, the Museum of the African Diaspora reopened downtown with “Unbound: Art, Blackness and the Universe.”

Courtesy of Museum of the African Diaspora/Photo by Josef Jacques

After almost six months of lying dormant during maintenance renovations, The Museum of the African Diaspora reopened downtown with Unbound: Art, Blackness and the Universe, a sprawling group show that posits a cosmic concept of Blackness, and Continuum: MoAD Over Time, which takes visitors on a tour of the museum’s history and local impact.

The reopening coincided with the second edition of Nexus: SF/Bay Area Black Art Week. In late December, MoAD and SFMOMA announced the appointment of a joint curator of the African diaspora to work across both institutions.

MoAD’s return this year felt like a relief, especially at a time when it’s easy to imagine a museum might not turn the lights back on after going into hibernation.

Down the street from MoAD, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts missed an opportunity to make the most of its comeback show after 2024 was marred by its decision to censor the work of pro-Palestinian artists.

This year's show, which focused on the San Francisco art scene of the early 2000s, felt largely out of touch with the current moment, celebratory of a community that feels difficult to imagine here today. But it did draw one significant parallel — the dot-com boom of the late-'90s posed a threat to the art community similar to that of the current AI boom and corporate revitalization efforts in The City.

Part of that threat has to do with the increased privatization of arts funding.

In April, the Big Art Loop launched with “R-Evolution,” a 40-foot steel sculpture of a naked woman in front of the Ferry Building. The planned project, a collaboration between public-art agency Building 180 and tech billionaire and GitLab cofounder Sid Sijbrandij, will place 100 sculptures — most left over from Burning Man — throughout San Francisco over the next three years.

In the case of the Embarcadero, The City seems happy to hand off a large portion of its public image to the private sector. Last month, the San Francisco Arts Commission voted to remove the historical Vaillancourt Fountain from Embarcadero Plaza — in the shadow of “R-Evolution” — to make way for a redevelopment of the park by Boston Properties.



Naga, a 25-foot-tall serpent sculpture, was installed in July in Golden Gate Park. The piece, transplanted from Burning Man, is part of a billionaire-funded citywide effort.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

San Francisco has always been a boom-and-bust town. Art tends to thrive during the bust times, when rents are cheap and the cost of living dips. We saw that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, the AI boom and San Francisco's corporate comeback threaten the arts again, in a familiar repeat of the dot-com boom, which squeezed many artists out. These issues aren't unique to San Francisco, but they feel exacerbated here, where the arts have always had to fight for their place.

It isn't enough for artists to double down on their principles. If San Francisco's artistic community is going to stick around, it is imperative that The City show its support. It must commit beyond grant programs — which are under threat of consolidation — and shortsighted initiatives such as Vacant to Vibrant, which use art to drive up real-estate value.

San Francisco needs more meaningful and long-term commitments to its art community — like rent freezes, affordable housing, the return and expansion of the guaranteed income for artists program, and a potential base set-aside for arts funding in The City budget, which has instead relied too unevenly on the hotel tax to fund arts grants.

It has long been asked whether art will help save San Francisco. In 2026, San Francisco must save its art.

Max Blue is an art critic whose State of the Arts column appears monthly in The Examiner.

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