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Capitalism Museum Opens in Oakland

By Charles Desmarais
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Dread Scott's "Poll Dance" (2010) is on exhibit at the new Museum of Capitalism in Oakland's Jack London Square

You may not have heard, so under the radar have things been thus far, but the Bay Area got its newest museum this week. Situated in Oakland's Jack London Square, at the intersection of Politics and Art, the Museum of Capitalism opened Sunday, June 18.

The culmination of several years of planning, the startup cultural institution is a formidable effort. Featuring more than 80 artists and artist teams, the first exhibition at the 10,000-square-foot museum is supported by a \$215,000 grant from the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation. Organizers say the museum is “the first of its kind in the United States.” As a pop-up, it’s anybody’s guess how long it might continue past the Aug. 20 closing of the first show. Among the artists participating are such long-established figures as Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Chip Lord and Bruce Nauman. Most of the works, however, come from artists whose work has seen acceptance in this century, including Stanford lecturer Jenny Odell, Bakersfield artist Jesse Sugarman and Berkeley Guggenheim fellow Stephanie Syjuco.

The exhibition represents “the collaborative efforts of a multidisciplinary team of curators, historians, artists, and designers,” according to a press release. The museum is the brainchild of Timothy Furstnau and Andrea Steves, a husband-and-wife team calling themselves Fictilis. They presented the idea last year as a final MFA project at UC Santa Cruz.

Heather Pontonio, art program director at the Tremaine Foundation, said in an email that the jury for its prestigious Exhibition Award “unanimously ... felt that the Museum of Capitalism exemplified the mission of the Award — to further discourse in contemporary art.” She added that the museum “has engaged the most artists ... in our 19-year, 25-award history.”

Savlan Hauser, executive director of the Jack London Improvement District, said in a telephone interview that her group supported the museum because “creative place-making has a real, positive impact on the neighborhood. ... The buzz and interest and collaboration has already made it a success.”