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Trio of talent on display at Richmond Art Center

Wanxin Zhang - San Francisco Chronicle (CA) - Thursday, May 10, 2012

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San Francisco photographer John Chiara has exhibitions on both sides of the Bay: solo at Haines Gallery in San Francisco and alongside enamellist June Schwarcz and ceramic sculptor Wanxin Zhang at the Richmond Art Center.

Chiara uses a cumbersome, truck-mounted handmade camera and the dye destruction print process to produce physically unique landscape images. As his work at Haines and the gripping panorama "Echo Lake at Meyers Grade" (2010) at the RAC demonstrate, Chiara's images come out irregular in shape, moodily inaccurate in color and full of accidents, such as light leaks, that mark the making of each picture as an event.

At the RAC, he has mounted, masked color negatives on the south gallery's windows, so that the sun back-lighting them sets their reversed colors ablaze.

The play of reversals in Chiara's art works wonderfully with the remarkable enameled metal vessels of Schwarcz, who turns 94 next month.

Almost alone Schwarcz upgraded enameling from hobby status to a medium of profound creative invention.

Most of her objects on view take the form of vessels, but many express indifference to function and impassioned interest in and knowledge of modern painting and sculpture.

The complexities of Schwarcz's work, beyond the technical mastery they require, exhibit the inexplicably convincing quality that frequently marks not mere studio experience but true artistic maturity.

Schwarcz's work still falls under the shadows of critical and art market condescension, so this chance to see it in depth should not be missed.

Zhang's work at the RAC also offers a rare panorama of his accomplishment. He long ago mastered ceramic techniques and began applying them to building life-size figures with elaborate, ambiguous, often comic details. A loose cohort of these figures confronts the visitor at the entrance to the RAC's main gallery.

The smallest pair of them, titled "What's Up?", face each other on high pedestals. They represent Zhang's creative thinking well. Like many of his sculptures, they evoke the terracotta army of guardians buried with the First Qin Dynasty emperor in the 3rd century B. C.

Since the tomb's excavation in the 1970s, which the guardians failed to prevent, groups of them have been exhibited in cities around the world, including San Francisco.

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Zhang's two warriors square off, clad in an approximation of ancient armor, but unarmed apart from the gas mask that each wears.

Gas masks long evoked World War I, in which East Asia played little direct part, until 2001, when the Sept. 11 massacres and the anthrax incidents that followed reawakened American fear of attack by chemical or biological means.

Zhang's warriors' oddly passive showdown expresses the new order of distrust and incomprehension that characterizes the post-Cold War world, with a veiled lament at the persistence of war.

In other pieces, Zhang alludes stylistically to Robert Arneson (1930-1992), who gave self-portraiture countless comic turns. Viewers may suspect many of Zhang's pieces of being self-images in disguise.

In one sculpture, he offers a portrait of Mao Zedong, under whose tyranny Zhang grew up. Zhang's title - "Warhol/Mao" (2006) - invokes the Pop chameleon as intermediary. But a sinister echo of Mao's cheerful image in propaganda art comes through anyway.