

GALLERY
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SF Chronicle

A soundless 'Art and Vinyl' at Fraenkel Gallery

By [Charles Desmarais](#)

January 12, 2018 Updated: January 12, 2018 6:15pm



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Photo: ♦ 2018 The Josef And Anni Albers Foundation / Adagg, Paris, Fraenkel Gallery

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Josef Albers' jacket for "Provocative Percussion Volume 4 by Enoch Light and The Light Brigade" (1962) is part of the exhibition "Art & Vinyl" at Fraenkel Gallery

Art exhibitions about non-art subjects tend to fall flat. Knowing that, I approached "Art and Vinyl," an exhibition at Fraenkel Gallery through March 3, with some skepticism.

A Midwestern museum where I once worked put on a "Baseball in Art" exhibition. The World Series was coming to town. We should have guessed how it would turn out: Baseball fans, for the most part, skipped the art exhibition — their interest was in the game.

Another show that toured the country, "It's Only Rock and Roll," made a curatorial point about rock's influence on contemporary art. It was a flop, compared with "Who Shot Rock and Roll," which consisted entirely of photographs of the stars.

Which brings me to "Art and Vinyl." On the one hand, there are few galleries as dependably smart about the art they present as Fraenkel, which signaled its commitment to the subject by investing in a lavish, 464-page book to go along with the show.

On the other, music album covers — which make up most of the exhibition — are basically packaging. Google images of "package design" and you'll see hundreds of examples, each more colorful and innovative than the next, of everything from acne medicine to truffle oil.

Great graphic design serves a function different from art. It intrigues. Explains. Motivates. But its value is synergistic rather than intrinsic.

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The show is introduced by a 1984 Gerhard Richter painting on an LP by pianist Glenn Gould. It's an intriguing object given its provenance, but one that seems particularly out of place among a show primarily of printed album covers. There must be many records that have been overpainted — I have two at home, bought from a street artist in Mexico. Pedigree alone hardly seems enough to warrant the Richter inclusion.

The exhibition begins to take off with an Andy Warhol-illustrated cover for a recording of a radio broadcast on drug use (“The Nation’s Nightmare,” 1952); Jean Cocteau’s sleeve for a Berthe Bovy reading of his play “La Voix Humane” (1958); and a 1959 monochrome, Yves Klein-blue cover for recordings of Klein’s lectures “The Evolution of Art Toward the Immaterial” and “The Architecture of the Air” (1959).

Yet that Klein piece, housing a rare speech in the artist’s own voice, points up the big disappointment of the exhibition: None of the recordings is available for listening. That’s fine for Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” (1984), with a cover by Annie Leibovitz, or any of the six Rolling Stones albums included, because the songs are widely available. But some of the most intriguing titles were produced in small editions, and many of the designs are for albums of music and sound by the artists themselves. You might find a few online, but that’s hit-or-miss.

Does the imagery, mostly in reproduction, on the artist-designed album sleeves relate to the music inside? We may never know.

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Photo: ♦ Raymond Pettibon, Fraenkel Gallery
Raymond Pettibon, "Goo" by Sonic Youth (1990)

All that aside, the exhibition entertains.

We are told that the first illustrated album sleeve was produced in 1939. Ten years later, the French communist partisan Pablo Picasso designed a disk for Paul Robeson's "Chante pour la Paix" — not an album cover, but a Picasso drawing of the dove of peace, reproduced in white directly against the black background of the record.

A series of eight albums released between 1959 and 1962 — four of "Persuasive Percussion," four of "Provocative Percussion" — all have covers designed by Josef Albers. It is hard to look at the staccato graphic arrangements on the

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enclosures (a kind of visual jazz?) and not surmise a relationship to the sounds they protect.

Harry Bertoia's "Sonambient" sculptures got their own recordings — 11 of them between 1970 and 1978 — enclosed within portraits of the famous, plantlike art forms in strong black-and-white photographs printed on the covers.

With well over 100, mostly rare objects in this lighthearted review, it is hard to choose a favorite among designs by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sophie Calle, Jean Dubuffet, Marlene Dumas, Yves Klein, Barbara Kruger, Sol LeWitt, Chris Ofili, Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol and many others.

But I will go with Banksy, the artist who closely guards his secret identity as he leaves his provocative mark on urban walls around the world. He is credited with the 2008 design of a 45-rpm record sleeve. The performer? Unknown, of course.

Two introductions at the Presidio. When Wendi Norris announced the closure of her gallery on Jessie Street late last year, she put forth the idea that she could better serve her artists and the public by staging pop-up exhibitions around the world. The first would be a show of work by María Magdalena Campos-Pons, an artist originally from Cuba who has received wide attention, but has not previously shown on the West Coast.

I had to see it, and the exhibition was well worth the visit. It is housed in an old military training facility in the Presidio — the same space used for a (less successful) Annie Leibovitz installation two years ago, as some visitors will remember.

"If I Were a Poet" consists of several elaborate installations and a few related but independent works. The theme of independence — freedom from a

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heritage of slavery, the strength of women in community, the constraints of the Cuban economy — weaves dreamily through the show. Its romantic mysteries are heightened for those of us with limited command of Spanish, the language used for several works that employ extensive texts.

Playing catch-up. My overview of current San Francisco gallery exhibitions in The Chronicle on Thursday, Jan. 11, was due before I had the chance to see three excellent exhibitions I would not want readers to miss.

Altman Siegel Gallery, 1150 25th St. (www.altmansiegel.com), is presenting “Liam Everett: ‘Fais semblant qu’on n’est pas ici’” through March 3. Painted cloths draped, apparently haphazardly, over large frames suggest stage backdrops. Or, perhaps, they are personages in tattered veils, formally dancing or facing off. They are surrounded, as if being observed (surveilled? or watched over?) by Everett’s signature abstract canvases, remnants of painterly decisions made and reconsidered, enhanced by oxidized metal scars and other controlled accidents.



Photo: Altman Siegel

An installation view of Liam Everett’s “Fais semblant qu’on n’est pas ici” (2018) at Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Immediately across the entryway at the same address, **Adrian Rosenfeld Gallery** (<https://adrianrosenfeld.com>) continues its string of vigorous, small-scale collaborations with other galleries. “Peter, Paul and Mary” comes from New York’s Maccarone and features four or five works each by Peter Halley, Paul Lee and Mary Heilmann.

And **Jessica Silverman Gallery**, 488 Ellis St.

(<http://jessicasilvermangallery.com>), gives us “Open House: The Modern Institute” through Feb. 24. Also a collaboration, this one with a Glasgow, Scotland, organization, it’s a lively, survey and a taste of the Glaswegian comic sensibility

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Art and Vinyl: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; Saturdays 11 a.m.-5p.m. Through March 3. Free. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 981-2661. <https://fraenkelgallery.com>

María Magdalena Campos-Pons: If I Were A Poet: Noon-6 p.m., Thursdays-Sundays. Through Jan. 28. Free. Gallery Wendi Norris, 649 Old Mason St., S.F. (temporary location). (415) 346-7812. www.gallerywendinorris.com



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