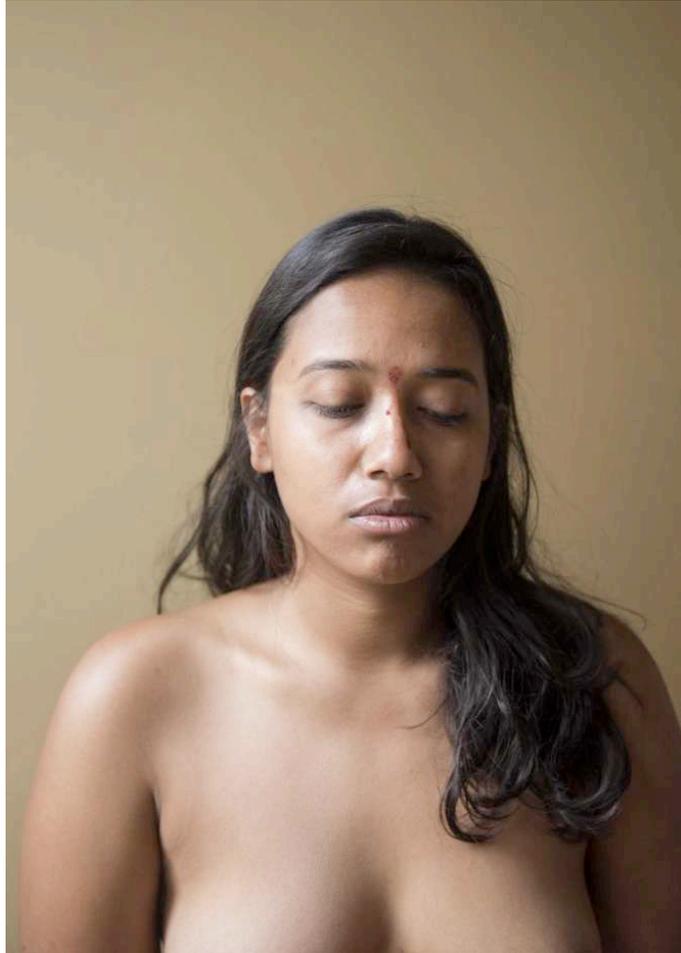


'Green Book' highlights persistence of marginalized communities

Ryan Kost

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Le : "Menstrual Bindi" by Vasudhaa Narayanan is among the works by artists of color in the gallery's 27th juried exhibition.

Photo: Vasudhaa Narayanan

From 1936 to 1966, a New York City mail carrier named Victor Hugo Green published an essential road-trip guide titled "The Negro Motorist Green Book." "The Green Book," as it was called, was a product of the Jim Crow era, a time when black drivers were routinely denied everything from gas to food to lodging — and worse. Each year (aside from a brief hiatus during World War II), Green laid out the stops and routes (initially just in the New York area, but later throughout North America) that were safe for black Americans to travel.

Portland, Ore., curator Ashley Stull Meyers found inspiration in this history — an example of a community holding itself, protecting itself — for her show now on display at Southern Exposure in San Francisco’s Mission District. The exhibition cites its source even in its name — “Green Book” — and focuses on image-based works all created by artists of color.

“Even though (‘The Green Book’) is explicit to the African American community, there are versions, if not an exact book ... for every sort of marginalized community,” says Stull Meyers, who is black. “I feel like all marginalized groups develop their own sorts of systems and networks for holding space and making each other feel safe and creating environments that are for themselves. ... I wanted to communicate that broadly.”

More Information

“**Green Book**”: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Aug. 18. Southern Exposure, 3030 20th St., S.F. www.soex.org

“Green Book” is the 27th juried exhibition at Southern Exposure, a much-loved tradition at the art space. Every year, the organization chooses a guest curator and puts out an open call for submissions. In past years, artists would line up outside and wait for a brief meeting with the curator, who would take a look at each portfolio and select the works that touched them.

Rather than begin with a concept, the curator must fan out the art, take a broad view, and find the common thread among the many pieces.

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This year, Southern Exposure did away with the line around the block and switched to digital submissions. The call was also limited to artists of color.

Stull Meyers had more than 130 entries to choose from. Two things struck her the most as she looked at the entries: the portrait work and the images of public spaces.

“I’m really interested in, through the concept of ‘Green Book,’ thinking through what it is to be a person of color, a black or brown body, in public space and the various ways you feel forced to make compromises with your identity,” she says.

The 18 artists she chose for the show offer pieces that both stretch the concept of image-based art and reflect the experiences of several communities, including black, Latinx, Indian and Pakistani.

Some of the work speaks to the sort of compromises Stull Meyers mentioned. Dominic Garcia, for instance, offers two self-portraits from a series called “Color” in which he paints his naked body. In “Green,” his body hangs over a graffiti-filled wall and seems to almost disappear into the leaves above him.

“I wanted to be more of a chameleon in that public space,” he says. “The person becomes part of that background and is perceived as an object rather than a person.”

Other artists and their works are more inclined to take up space. In this regard, two artists stand out.

Adrian Octavius Walker, who focuses on creating portraits of black people in an attempt to show “what it is to be in a black body,” presents a series of three portraits of black men modeling do-rags. The images, initially shot for a fashion lookbook, highlight and celebrate a frequently stigmatized African American style in an unapologetic way.

“You look at a man in a do-rag, a lot of folks are looking at him like he’s probably a thug, he’s no good or something like that,” Walker says, “when, all in all, he’s just protecting his hair.”

Vasudhaa Narayanan is similarly confident in the self-portrait that she has hanging in “Green Book.” In the image titled “Menstrual Bindi,” Narayanan frames herself against a tan background, shirtless, from her chest up. Her eyes are closed and her long, dark hair is pulled back and over one shoulder. Right between her eyebrows is a bindi made of dried menstrual blood; one can see, too, that the blood has run down the side of her nose.

Narayanan’s grandparents were Brahmin, she says. Growing up in the south of India, “when I was on my period, I wasn’t allowed to enter the kitchen or the prayer room or touch anyone, because of age-old patriarchal social constructs that control how women move through the domestic space.”

Earlier works, on this and similar subjects, were angrier, Narayanan says. But here, she appears calm, even at ease.

“In a way, it’s self-acceptance, for me to accept that this a part of my own experience and confront my shame,” she says. “It isn’t to confront anyone else.”

In a vastly different sort of portraiture, but one that is still deeply rooted in identity, Alexander Hernandez has taken images from the gay hookup apps Grindr and Scruff, pixelated them, printed them onto pieces of fabric and created patchwork photographic quilts.

The San Francisco artist is a first-generation immigrant, so his pieces, “a collage of different things coming together,” illustrate the way he sees himself: “a piece of a quilt, made of different things, different patterns.”

The two pieces in “Green Book” juxtapose erotic images of men with background fabrics that recall, for Hernandez, childhood and a certain amount of Americana. In some ways, they can be seen as quilted pinup posters he might have had hanging in his room.

Though portrait-heavy, the show pushes beyond individuals. Nick DeRenzi contributes street scenes from the Mission District and Tenderloin, while Nathaniel DeVivo includes black-and-white images from Martin Luther King Jr. Day rallies in the Bay Area in 2016. Amir Saadiq displays two photographs, one of a man, kneeling, st in the air, shot from behind so the viewer can see that his football jersey reads “Kaepernick,” the quarterback who left the San Francisco 49ers amid national controversy because he refused to stand during the national anthem before games in protest of racial injustice.

The connections among the pieces aren’t always immediately obvious, but as one moves through the gallery, Stull Meyers’ intention becomes clear. She has, deliberately and successfully, created her own sort of “Green Book” for the Bay Area, a place she called home from 2010 to 2014.

“I was thinking of the exhibition, metaphorically, as a sort of network for communicating what neighborhoods and communities are still around in the face of this gentrification and disappearing,” she says. “This is where these communities still exist. This is how we travel through these spaces and, you know, hold space.”

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