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LAURA MORTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

To the Sea in Ships, as Naughty as Ever

By MELENA RYZIK

SAN FRANCISCO — The drag queen Persia, in full bejeweled regalia, went out on one of the first rafts, sloping down the launch ramp in thigh-high red stiletto boots.

She was motoring out to four sailboats anchored together within sight of the Bay Bridge here. Climbing aboard, she found a cabin where her breath steamed up a porthole as she danced,

The artist Constance Hockaday's "All These Darlings and Now Us" is a floating peep-show installation.

topless save for the rhinestones twinkling across her chest. At sunset, Persia came up on deck and straddled a boom, wriggling in her nautical boy shorts as onlookers waved dollar bills.

It was the opening of "All These Darlings and Now Us," a waterborne installation combining performance art, urban resistance and a sex-positive philosophy. Or, as its organizers preferred to call it, a floating peep show. On Sunday night, more than 100 visitors were transported from the shore to a nautical — and somewhat naughty — version of a red-light district created onboard gently bobbing boats. Behind

doors with peepholes, they watched a mermaid playing the ukulele, netting covering her breasts; a stripper in a schoolgirl skirt and A.F.L.-C.I.O. T-shirt, with a backpack full of sex toys; men in wigs and feathers; and one woman inflating, and then raunchily deflating, balloons. "Thank you, stripper boats!" one visitor called, grinning and waving into the night as he was motored back to land.

The show was conceived by the artist Constance Hockaday as a commentary on the forces of technification and

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gentrification roiling this city and, especially, as a response to the demise of two beloved sex clubs: the Lusty Lady, a worker-owned and unionized strip club, which closed last year, and Esta Noche (translation: Tonight), an infamous Latino gay bar and performance space, which had its final show in March. Coupled with a recent ban on public nudity, the closings have left some residents worrying that San Francisco is losing the anything-goes vibe that made the city a boho mecca.

Rather than lament, Ms. Hockaday, 32, decided to highlight the outré scene that remained, taking it to the water, where fewer rules apply. "There is this culture of sex in San Francisco that's still very unique," even as its denizens are being pushed out, she said. "There's no space for us on land? O.K., fine, we're going to go play on the water."

The show was sponsored by Southern Exposure, a nonprofit known for supporting alternative art. "We thought it was an important time and an important way to talk about the shifts that are going on in San Francisco in

The installation "All These Darlings and Now Us" continues through Saturday in San Francisco; soex.org.

this really celebratory, poetic way," said Valerie Imus, its exhibitions director. As space becomes scarcer and pricier, she said, artists are "thinking of places to site works outside the boundaries of the city, and looking at community and local history" to inspire experimentation.

Ms. Hockaday's project aims for boundary-pushing exhibitionism. It harks back to century-old floating brothels and reflects the lascivious reputation of the Barbary Coast in San Francisco, near where the stripper Carol Doda once performed (and where the Lusty Lady was).

"It's also just good fun to come and watch some naked people of all shapes and sizes celebrating their bodies," Ms. Imus said. Registered guests were taken by raft to a secret location on the water — after signing a liability waiver. (The shows continue through Saturday, in a new location.)

Ms. Hockaday hired Esta Noche and Lusty Lady alums and organized the acts with an eye toward diversity, rejecting Victorian pinup-and-garter nostalgia. "I tried really hard to steer everybody away from steampunk cabaret," she said. Among her coups was persuading the veteran performer and educator Carol Queen, the resident sexologist at the Good Vibrations erotica shops, to appear.

"Nobody expects to see a 56-



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Trixie Carr at the opening-night party of "All These Darlings and Now Us" in San Francisco.

year-old woman with half-silver hair and a red strap-on dildo," said Ms. Queen, who came out of semi-retirement to don a cupless push-up bra for the night.

Ivy Jeanne, 38, a longtime San Franciscan, lingered at Ms. Queen's booth, listening to her tell an X-rated story. "At a time when so many of our cultural establishments are disappearing, it's so important to find creative ways to resist," Ms. Jeanne said.

The opening was held in conjunction with the private Bay View Boat Club, in the Dogpatch, a once industrial part of the city

now dotted with artisanal shops, new construction towers and high-tech campuses. Ms. Hockaday said she hoped that Bay View members — many of them blue-collar, who come as much for the \$3 drinks as for the views — would mingle with her crowd; she booked Persia and the musical group Daddies Plastik to perform numbers like "Stop Being Poor" and their viral hit "Google Google Apps Apps."

Mike Dingle, 61, a nursing assistant, musician and boat club member who's lived in San Francisco since 1978, watched as the

performers threw flowers on the floor, bounced and sang over a pulsing beat, the crowd joining in. "It was a little precious at first; then it got fun," he said. Smiling, he added, "I had a vision of 'Satriyanon,'" a world of excess for a privileged few.

In spirit, "All These Darlings and Now Us" — the title comes from a verse by Anne Carson — echoes another of Ms. Hockaday's socially conscious projects, the Boggsville Boatel, a boat hotel she created at an underused marina in Far Rockaway, Queens, in 2011. There, too, she hoped to

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

More images from the peep show project:
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foster community, and it worked, for a while. But when she returned home to Oakland, Calif., the Boatel became mostly a magnet for vacationing hipsters. Ms. Hockaday, who holds master's degrees in fine arts and conflict resolution, is still working out whether her projects can react to gentrification without enabling it, she said.

Persia, 32, had performed at Esta Noche for five years, watching its shows dwindle from nightly to weekends as its neighborhood, the Mission, grew fancy around it. "Towards the end, there were less and less Latinos coming, because they don't live in the city anymore; they were priced out," said Persia, who also works several day jobs.

But on Sunday, on the water, protest and woe were temporarily forgotten. "For every one of these you put in, I'll take something off," promised a dancer named Valentine, holding a dollar fed into a tip slot in her door. Ms. Hockaday, who paid the performers \$25 an hour, urged visitors to tip generously. Her friend, the Brooklyn artist Duke Riley, served as a barker. "You got about 20 minutes" on the boats, he advised guests, "so don't fall in love."