

FACING EDEN

100 Years of Landscape Art in the Bay Area



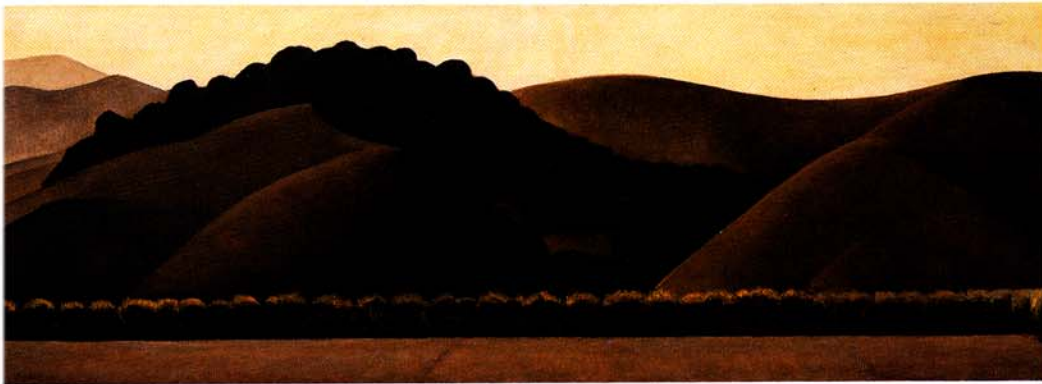
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100 Years of Landscape Art in the Bay Area

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with contributions by

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Metaphor, Matter, Canvas, Stage: Conceptual Art 1968 to 1995

Constance Lewallen

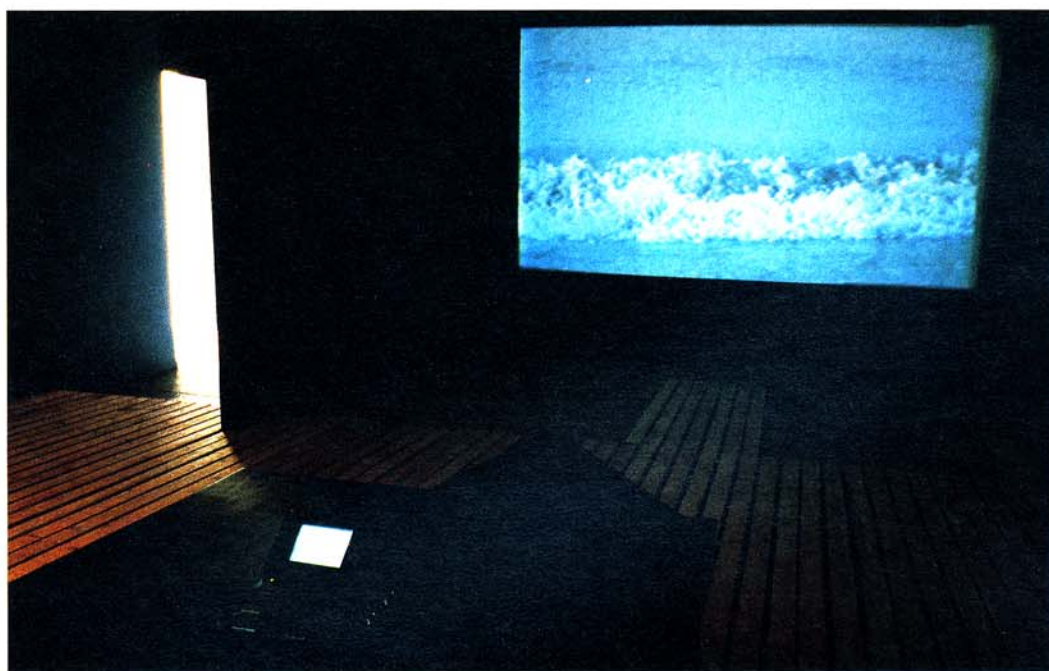


fig.18 Lewis deSoto, *Häypatak, Witness, Kansatsusha*, 1990/95
A view of the original video installation held at the San Francisco Art
Commission Gallery, October through November 1990
Courtesy the artist
and Haines Gallery, San Francisco, *cat.no.35*

as well as to abide by a list of other rules. Beneath the humor of the exhibits – a dry birdbath filled with rocks accompanied by synthesized birdcalls, a vista point with the view blocked by two large metal plates – was a serious commentary on nature's role today as a commodity and how our experience of nature is mediated and controlled.

No group has suffered more as a result of land development policies than Native Americans. Native versus non-Native American attitudes toward the land are the subject of Brian Tripp's sculpture, *In Memory of Mount Diablo: TU-YOYSH-TAK (TY-YOY-SHIP), Mountain to Mountain, When Straight Line Straightened out Circle, 1992* (fig.17), and Lewis deSoto's video installation, *Háypatak, Witness, Kansatsusha, 1990/95* (fig.18). Tripp succinctly contrasts religious and economic views of the value of the land. His sculpture is composed of a simulated Native American ceremonial fire pit circled by feathers and decorated with a nestlike hoop of painted sticks over which is suspended a plumb bob. The plumb bob hangs from a string threaded over a pulley. The other end of the string holds a merchant's moneybag filled with pennies. Mount Diablo, a powerful Ohlone sacred site, was the peak from which the great 1850s California Land Survey began. Not only was the traditional Native American reliance on circles for many ceremonies at odds with the white man's gridded divisions,²⁰ but the very concept of individual land ownership and transfer was unknown in the Native American culture. The Mount Diablo survey literally laid the groundwork for the subsequent rampant development that forced Native Americans off their land.

DeSoto's installation, *Háypatak, Witness, Kansatsusha*, titled with the Lake Miwok, English, and Japanese words for "witness," contrasts three cultural modes of consciousness in the context of landscape. Viewers entering deSoto's darkened room confront a wall-sized video projection of the shore at Drake's Bay near San Francisco, where Sir Francis Drake landed in 1579. This date marks the beginning of the cultural clash between English-speaking peoples and the area's indigenous inhabitants. Jerky, chaotic, slowed-down views pan the bay accompanied by electronically altered sounds of the ocean, symbolizing Drake's colonial view of the land as alien and frightening, something to be conquered (manifested by the assignment of men's names to places). The colonial attitude of land domination is borne out by the occasional overlays of barely legible textual fragments from Drake's journal, beginning with "Ever since almighty God commanded Adam to subdue the earth. . . ." Close-up shots of flora and the water's edge, which bring the viewer into the landscape, represent the Native American's affinity with the natural world. Acknowledging the arrival of Buddhism on the West Coast with large groups of Asian immigrants

during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, deSoto suggests the Asian view of nature in the third segment of the tape in which gently moving clouds symbolize thoughts passing through the mind in a meditative state. The gentle ringing of a Tibetan bell is heard in the background.

As one walks along a strip of the slatted wood flooring extending like a jetty toward the video projection, one's shadow becomes part of the image – "Thus spectatorship becomes a mode of participation instead of the detached state that is asserted by most Western image-making traditions."²¹ A tiny video monitor on a pedestal in the middle of the room portrays the back of the artist as he looks out at the water. Texts by Julian Lang, Native American artist, writer, and historian, and religious scholar Patrick Mahaffey accompany the installation.

In deSoto's hands, video installation is a powerful medium that expands time and space so that viewers participate in a world of the artist's devising. DeSoto exploits the interactive characteristics of the form "to exchange given perceptions about reality and relate to other possibilities of human cognition."²²

Several artists respond to the Bay Area's distinctive geography, geology, and climate. Bill Fontana is among the small group of artists whose work is entirely defined by sonic installations. Fontana's sound sculptures are sophisticated investigations into the way we perceive sounds. His site-specific installations relocate ambient sounds from the urban or natural environment to urban public spaces, thereby bringing new awareness of the aural landscape. In 1981 he created a live acoustic portrait of San Francisco Bay using its distinctive foghorns on the Golden Gate Bridge as a point of reference. Fontana installed microphones around the Bay that simultaneously transmitted to loudspeakers mounted on a pier at Fort Mason. As each of the eight microphone locations picked up the sounds of the foghorns from its own unique perspective, listeners at the pier heard a collage of sounds, including the ambient sounds of the harbor. Sound delays created by the varying distances of the microphones from the bridge added to what Fontana called a cubist sound map. For the fiftieth anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1987 he created a duet of sounds between the bridge and the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, transmitting sounds from each to a speaker mounted on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The seismic conditions of the Bay Area inspired Terry Fox's 1987 Capp Street Project installation, *Instrument to Be Played by the Movement of the Earth*. Each of the constructions that composed the installation – a tower of glasses and glass plates, a lead weight suspended against a thin glass disk – would have produced sound in the event of a tremor. Douglas Hollis, Peter Richards, and Ned Kahn also use scientific principles in the creation