

EyeJacking Culture, at Two Stunning New Exhibits

'Kaleidoscope Eyes' at Haines Gallery is like stepping into a dream state of heightened senses, while the augmented-reality exhibits at 'Re-Engineering Humanity' at 836M give patrons even more reality.

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Camille Utterback, *Precarious*. Photo by Jeff Malet, courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery

A middle-aged man is standing in front of **Camille Utterback's *Precarious***, and he's waving both hands like a magician casting a spell. Next to him is a younger man who's swaying his hands (and his body) like a Hawaiian hula dancer. Art-goers do the craziest things when they're around Utterback's interactive art — and that's great by Utterback. Hell, she does it herself. She can't help it. No one can.

Utterback makes art that responds to people's movements — and then changes itself in front of their eyes, with new squiggles, new forms, and new movements that turn works like *Precarious* into living, breathing ecosystems. They're abstract ecosystems — her new work skewing toward the artistic styles of **de Kooning** and **Diebenkorn** — but ecosystems nevertheless that relate to people and are run by software.

"I'm writing code that generates the rules. I feel like I'm playing an instrument or drawing, where the more you do it, the more fluid it is," Utterback tells *SF Weekly* as she watches the men [gyrate at her Haines Gallery exhibit](#). "It's like any skills-based process. And the tools keep improving. There are a lot of physics with the system, like with how the colored pieces push each other around when you push them around. That was much harder to do even a few years ago. The faster the technology gets, the more complex I can make the system."

Haines Gallery has paired Utterback's work with the always-scintillating mirrored art of **Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian**, and the resulting exhibit, "[Kaleidoscope Eyes](#)," is like stepping into a dream state of heightened senses, where alluring shapes beckon everywhere you look. With Utterback's art, that means large-scale works that use overhead cameras to detect movements or outlines — and which then interpret those detections in the art itself. The cameras and the interactive artworks work with data and Utterback's own designs, which are all on the "backend." Art-goers never see these software machinations. They only see the changing art. And the flailing limbs of other art-goers who let themselves go for the sake of fine art.

Utterback has been exhibiting her interactive art for 20 years — ever since graduating from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program — and has refined her artworks over those two decades. In 2000, her *Text Rain* had letters precipitating slowly down on a projection screen that art-goers faced. The letters floated onto the outlines of the art-goers' bodies or objects they held, allowing people to "catch" the letters by holding out their arms. Alternately, they could push or play with the letters through the movement of their arms, heads, or anything else. One time, two people brought a cape and slapped at the letters as if they were soap bubbles. The letters originated from poetic lines about bodies and movement, as in the verse, "At your turning, each part of my body turns to verb," so *Text Rain* played with art-goers intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

Now an assistant professor at Stanford's Art and Art History Department, Utterback won a MacArthur "genius" grant in 2009, with the MacArthur Foundation saying Utterback was "redefining how viewers experience and interact with art." That redefining is an ongoing process — not just in Utterback's practice but those of other artists whose technology-driven work gives art-goers what could be called "individual attention."

And then there's the growing number of artists employing augmented reality, in which art-goers are asked to wear special glasses or use a smart-phone app to interact with art that comes alive in spectacular ways. That's what's happening at 836M gallery, where the exhibit "[Re-Engineering Humanity](#)" includes three artworks that are jaw-droppingly great. The greatness happens, in part, because of the artworks' "before" and "after"

effects. In the “before” category, the three works — **Marjan Moghaddam’s** *Glitch Goddess of Art Basel Miami 695, in Red*, Mark Sabb’s *Pray for Me II*, and Stuart Campbell’s *Breaking News* — are fine but flat, static pieces. They hang on walls and clearly have something to say about women’s body image, Haitian youth culture, and the American media landscape, respectively.

But seeing them through a smartphone app turns each piece into three-dimensional, multimedia performances — like stage shows that use props and gizmos to viscerally reach their audiences. With the correct app, called **ARize**, the female figure in Marjan Moghaddam’s *Glitch Goddess of Art Basel Miami 695, in Red* walks out of the art, changes shapes, and evolves every few seconds (with a variation of the original outfit) into different female characters. As they morph, they talk — both vainly and profoundly — about women’s body shapes, how society values male artists more than female ones, and other fundamental topics. The conversation veers from funny to forceful, with Moghaddam having said that the artwork’s figures “remind us that every aspect of our experience is now glitched.”

Campbell’s *Breaking News* is also a commentary on a glitched culture, using an enlarged front page of *The New York Times* from June 2017 that features Donald Trump and the headline, “TRUMP ABANDONING GLOBAL CLIMATE ACCORD.” For Democratic-leaning or environmentally oriented art-goers, the giant artwork is enough to prompt palpitations and head-shaking. But look at *Breaking News* through the correct app, called **EyeJack** (which Campbell co-founded), and here’s what you get: Video snippets of Trump’s dubious, nonsensical utterances around global warming; video of severe climate in the background as he delivers his specious claims; and floating graphics that make clear that the Trump administration is run by morally corrupt officials who value profits (and coal) over anything else.

So the Augmented Reality apps give the artworks at 836M *even more reality*. These aren’t escapes into artifice and unfettered pleasure. No. They’re a new way to experience a subject as much as an art object. And that’s the point, says the exhibit’s curator, Lady PheOnix, who tells *SF Weekly* that technology-driven visual aids, whether smartphone apps, special eyeglasses, AR goggles, or something else, “are really the future of all communication. Even if there were, like, another Arab Spring — say it was a ‘Bay Area Spring’ — and all our political messaging was embedded, and we had a secret app and it was invitation only, we’d only get those embedded messages through the augmented reality.”

On June 2, “Re-Engineering Humanity” shuffles its exhibit around to feature computational works made with artificial intelligence. One reason that Lady PheOnix is so hyped about augmented reality: Even the exhibit’s printed brochure lets art-goers with the correct apps experience virtually the same multimedia effects that they would inside the gallery. So art-

goers can, say, be at a café or at home and engage with the exhibit's art just by pointing their phones at the brochure — at least in theory, since if the available light is imperfect, the apps can get, well, glitchy. And when *SF Weekly* used EyeJack, it wouldn't store more than one recording.

Another glitch. That could be a smartphone issue more than an app issue, and it's a minor one — “first-class problems,” as some might say. And “Re-Engineering Humanity” isn't just a digital-oriented exhibit. Samira Idroos' *Sit Down. Be Humble* features a Muslim prayer rug with those words, prayer beads, shoes, and another rug — all of which lets Idroos use Islamic culture and a Kendrick Lamar song to explore what she has called “the religiosity of music through the use of popular lyrics.” *Sit Down. Be Humble* has no music itself. It's purely analog art.

Haines Gallery's “Kaleidoscope Eyes” is also a digital/analog show, with Farmanfarmaian's mirrored art an ideal complement to Utterback's interactive work.

One of Iran's most celebrated artists, Farmanfarmaian passed away on April 20 at age 96, after “Kaleidoscope Eyes” opened, so the exhibit has become a celebration of a life that saw Farmanfarmaian reach exalted heights — not just in Iran but in the United States, where she lived for many years. Farmanfarmaian incorporated pieces of mirror and glass in her art, borrowing from Persian aesthetics to make art that could be any shape — octagonal, circular, wavy, or whatever — but always had patterns within patterns, and always reflected light in a beautiful way. Mirrors, Farmanfarmaian once said, give everyone “a reflection of your soul.” So “soulful” is one way to describe the mirrored art in “Kaleidoscope Eyes.” That word would apply both to Farmanfarmaian's art and to Utterback's.

“What's interesting about light hitting Monir's pieces is that it becomes part of the physical space, so there's a relationship between the physical space and the work,” Utterback said while glancing at Farmanfarmaian's art.

“Mine is almost the inverse, so when people are in the physical space the camera sees them and you get incorporated into the work. Both works respond to their environment and want to be in dialogue with their surroundings. So with Monir's work, you see yourself in the mirror.”

“Kaleidoscope Eyes,” through June 1 at Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St. Free; 415-397-8114, or hainesgallery.com.

“Re-Engineering Humanity,” through May 17. The second phase, which features computational works made with artificial intelligence, runs from June 2 to Sept. 23, at 836 M, 836 Montgomery St. Free; 836m.org.

