



Sparkle
Nancy Genn (2011)
17" x 15" x 11"
Cast bronze, nickel plated

Re / Surfaces

The creation of virtual space, of a lookingglass world behind and beyond the picture plane, was the dominant metaphor of picture-making from the Renaissance up to the modern era. Modernist painting instead championed a flatter, abstract space that was to be looked at, not into (to make a sweeping generalization). A century-plus later, the battle between the traditional window or mirror and the new tabletop or, to use art critic Leo Steinberg's term, flatbed, once of great passion, has now faded, thankfully, and rightly so. The interplay or tension between flatness and depth, between literalism and illusion, between fact and metaphor, is constant in art history. Artworks are real objects assembled from real materials, but, in Picasso's words, "Art is a lie that tells the truth," as well. Two artists who explore art's double nature, its intriguing, disconcerting oscillation between object and symbol, are the sculptor Nancy Genn and the painter Sanjay Vora. Incidentally, the show's title, *Re/Surfaces*, also has multiple meanings: re, or of, surfaces; and resurfacing, new meanings superseding the old, like a roadway, periodically repaved, or a computer or television screen, continually refreshed—but with the old images and thoughts remaining, latent, in memory, but still retrievable.

Nancy Genn, of Berkeley, is an abstract painter as well as a sculptor, and has worked across the 2D/3D divide for years. Her calligraphic paintings are influenced by her travels in Asia, her love of Abstract Expressionist gesture, and her born-and-bred San Franciscan's love of nature. Her sculptures are, in effect, drawings in space informed by her curiosity about materials, and how to coax them to their expressive limits. (Genn was also one of the pioneers in the development of handmade paper.) The cast bronze pieces shown here were once thought to be technically impossible: one viewer even later insisted that Genn's pieces had been mislabeled. Genn's efforts—along with those of fellow artists Clare Falkenstein, Peter Voulkos, Harold Paris and Donald Haskin—made direct casting, that is, casting all at once, without piece molds and welding, work. This large-scale version of the lost-wax process destroys the artist's original maquette by heat, and is consequently somewhat risky, but the results are stunning. Genn's deceptively open, loose-looking arrangements of grapevine and manzanita wood (tied in



Ba's Sari

Sanjay Vora (2012)
48" x 72"
Oil, acrylic, and paper on canvas

place with cotton string) suggest Jackson Pollock paintings, materialized in the viewer's space, yet still recognizably branches, tied together: magical transformations of natural form into permanent, bronze metaphors for flux—and optical baskets for the containment of the viewer's gaze. If Genn's teachers, quoting Michelangelo, described a good sculpture (in marble, of course, during the Renaissance) as one you could roll down a hillside without damage, Genn's bronze nests or tumbleweeds like *Manzanita*, *Pacifica*, *Gather*, *Spunkle*, and the bowlike *Vessel No. 1* certainly pass that test; they're energy, embodied, and transfixing.

Oakland's **Sanjay Vora** focuses on a different kind of transformation: the retrieval or recuperation of the past through painting that combines both realist figuration (though often based on photographs or memories) and abstract explorations of material—heavy applications of impasto acrylic gel, furrowed and perforated so as to almost appear woven—through which we discern, as if peering through blinds or curtains, when the light intensity and direction are amenable, the subtle images beneath. Vora, an Indian-American who grew up bicultural in New Jersey, creates these time capsules as "testament[s] to love, history and the human experience. . . . Resulting from a psychic archaeological process, the metaphysical veil on each piece serves as a mediating function between the "then" and the "now," as the painted image recedes and arises, reconstructed, into visions . . . [evoking] the dream-like quality of the world." Vora's family photos, rendered with varying degrees of intensity and realism, constitute the deepest layer of the painting; over this he lays acrylic gel, laboriously creating the woven textures by repetitive scraping of the wet material; finally, he adds glazes of oil paint in order to bring the substrate and veil together. Paintings like *Pink Shirt*, *Wheelbarrow Ride* and *Ba's Sari*, based on old photos, have a universal appeal, whatever the specifics of our upbringing. Works that draw from more recent experience, like *Snowy Hill*, *Beach Walk* and *Gathering Before the Ride* are less nostalgic, but equally poetic. Vora's motionless figures surrounded by hazes of pictorial mist may remind viewers of the grand, elegiac depictions of contemporary life made in the 1880s and 1890s by the Divisionist dot-philosophers, Seurat and Signac, who monumentalized their passing present.

—DeWitt Cheng