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Catherine Wagner's Photos to Line Central Subway

by Sam Whiting
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To see a temporary exhibition of Catherine Wagner's photography, go to Stephen Wirtz Gallery at 49 Geary by Nov. 28. To see a permanent exhibition of Wagner's work, wait until Muni opens the Central Subway in 2018.

Wagner, 57, recently won a national competition by the San Francisco Arts Commission to etch her pictures into granite at the Moscone Station. It is an \$800,000 job and, since Wagner's pictures tend toward the oversize, she's working in an old mattress factory in the Mission District.

Q: Describe your pictures at Stephen Wirtz Gallery.

A: That is a body of work called "Reparations." I'm looking at the history of the splint. Whether it's a leg splint or a back splint, it's always mirroring the body. I'm using the splint as a metaphor for global fractures.

Q: Describe your subway project.

A: It's particularly exciting for me because I photographed the building of the Moscone Center 30 years ago when it was just a construction site. Now these photographs I made 30 years ago will become laser-etched onto granite 20 feet high on the side of the subway walls. When you're ascending or descending into the subway, you're seeing the photographs that were made in that exact location.

Q: Looked into anybody's refrigerator lately?

A: I'm not working on "Home and Other Stories" anymore, but I've continued a long lineage through my earlier work where I was looking at the ways in which we represent ourselves through our homes.

Q: So you're always looking behind doors?

A: I see myself as a keen observer. I think that mundane and banal things are so rich with information, but they're always passed over because of their banality. I developed an entire project around the lightbulb. That became an exhibition that traveled to galleries throughout the United States.

Q: Are you still on the faculty at Mills College?

A: I'm a full professor there. I particularly love it there because it's an art department situated in a liberal arts context.

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I'm a native San Franciscan, first generation. My mom is from the Philippines and my father is from Germany. We lived in San Francisco until I was about 10, then moved to Marin.

Q: What did you want to be?

A: I knew I wanted to be an artist. I specifically remember that my photography teacher at Redwood High School recognized a seriousness in me that I felt but I couldn't verbalize at the time.

Q: First job?

A: An after-school program in the arts. I was in eighth grade.

Q: Where do you live?

A: Bernal Heights. We have an 1880s house with an original barbershop underneath it, which is my office. My partner is Loretta Garvin.

Q: Have a pet?

A: Two kitties, Turtle and Butterfly.

Q: Favorite vacation spot?

A: The Big Island of Hawaii. I love that open black lava landscape.

Q: What would you buy if you could?

A: An Agnes Martin painting. There is a whole room of them at the Fisher Collection at SFMOMA.

Q: What would surprise people to know about you?

A: That I'm actually very shy.

Q: Secret talent?

A: I'm a fantastic cook. I make great Indian food.

Q: What would you call your autobiography?

A: "Looking Forward." I love contemporary culture, so I'm always looking forward to a new sense of discovery.

Q: Who plays you in the movie?

A: Lucille Ball.

Q: What haven't I asked you?

A: Why I do what I do.

Q: Why do you do what you do?

A: I think the process of making art and thinking about creativity gives substance to my life.

Q: Describe your hairdo?

A: Contemporary hairdo, a little wild but manageable.