

# 'Bellwether' is Southern Exposure's latest

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic  
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More...

Southern Exposure, one of the Bay Area's leading alternative exhibition spaces, has just opened in permanent quarters after nearly four nomadic years.

Just three blocks south of its old space at Project Artaud, the new SoEx has lower ceilings and less square footage - or rather more given over to operations - than its previous home. But admirers of the institution will share its administrators' satisfaction in its clean, but not too clean, new venue.

"Bellwether," the new SoEx's inaugural show, offers a selection of "relational art," to use the term coined by Nicholas Bourriaud for works that depend on people's participation - or at least their imagining it - to complete them.

Lordy Rodriguez's "First Colony" (2009) offers an example of this mode at its best. Known for his fictitious maps that invent or reinvent geography for purposes of political satire or critique, Rodriguez has advanced in this new work to inventing his own principality: First Colony.

A characteristic Rodriguez map envisions the territory, but he has not stopped there. For \$25, anyone can become a voting citizen of First Colony, walk away with a notably official-looking picture ID, and even cast a ballot (in a box affixed to the wall) in a referendum to be held near the end of the show's run.

To enrich the mythology, Rodriguez has fabricated anthropological artifacts of First Colony's past, including a "primitive" cell phone and iPod. Rodriguez plugs satirically into the current brouhaha over immigration and the meaning of citizenship. And true to the exhibition's title, many other contributors have delivered pieces that give form to anxieties or enthusiasms about the future.

San Franciscan Whitney Lynn has built a monument to the survivalist - or is it sustainability? - temperament in the form of a tiny cabin fitted out with nonperishable food, a water purification system, surveillance, seeds, tools and manuals for self-preservation. Extending a line laid down by Andrea Zittel, Lynn has made a burlesque of the American individualist fantasy of ultimate personal independence. One wishes it were much further from the truth.

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The paranoid note that Lynn strikes sounds again, though more subdued, in Jay Nelson's "The Golden Gate I" (2009), a handmade, battery-powered vehicle-cum-living-space, capable of 10 mph, that really is shaped like a wheeled beetle. Rather than escape or defiant survival, it hints at a post-real estate culture where no one can count on, or will care about, staying anywhere for very long.

Renee Gertler's amazing installation "Deluge Collapse" (2009) forms a schematic image - possibly foreboding, possibly redemptive - of a flood sweeping over a high wall, bearing away simulated familiar objects: a cell phone, a flip-flop, a plastic bag, a chair. The love of labor and materials the work bespeaks provides the most effective counterpoise here to the prevailing downbeat tenor of "Bellwether."

Gertler has made her "deluge" of hundreds of slivers of enameled basswood that delineate the descending current. The fragility of Gertler's piece and her investment of effort in it imply a hope for its survival that makes her work emblematic of SoEx's rebirth, even though she appears most out of step with the institution's commitment to open-form, participatory projects.

**Bellwether:** Commissioned works by 10 artists and collectives. Through Dec. 12. Southern Exposure, 3030 20th St., San Francisco. (415) 863-2141. [www.soex.org](http://www.soex.org).

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