FERTILE GROUND: ART AND COMMUNITY IN CALIFORNIA
TEACHER RESOURCES

The Story of California. The Story of You.
Oakland Museum of California
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

MURALS, PUBLIC ART, & ALLEGORY OF CALIFORNIA

GROUP f.64

POSTWAR AT THE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS

A NEW ART DEPARTMENT AT UC DAVIS

THE MISSION SCENE

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) combine their collections for the first time in *Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California*, an exhibition that illuminates local histories and social forces that changed the face of art in—and beyond—the Golden State.

Weaving together both museums’ holdings of California art and ephemera, the exhibition tells the stories of four creative communities active in the northern part of the state between the 1930s and the present. In each case, the exhibition shines a spotlight on artists who had their finger on the pulse of their time and the social conditions that allowed their ideas to flourish.

The exhibition features an array of artworks and historical documents, from monumental paintings to handwritten letters, relating to four key moments in the history of California art:

- Patronage, Public Art, and Allegory of California (1930s)
- Postwar at the California School of Fine Arts (1940s–50s)
- A New Art Department at UC Davis (1960s–70s)
- The Mission Scene (1990s–Today)

*Fertile Ground* interweaves the histories and friendships of artists, collectors, curators, and other individual and institutional collaborators against a backdrop of transformative social change. Viewed together, the materials assembled present a rare opportunity to consider what catalyzed these four remarkable outpourings of creativity, social awareness, and arts patronage.
ARTWORK SPOTLIGHT

Frieda and Diego Rivera by Frida Kahlo
1931
oil on canvas
39.375 x 31 in
Collection of SFMOMA, Albert M. Bender Collection,
gift of Albert M. Bender

Description of Artwork

In Frieda and Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo depicts a double portrait of herself and her husband. In the portrait, Kahlo’s dainty feet barely touch the ground, peeking out under her skirts. Next to Kahlo, Rivera appears massive and firmly planted on the ground, with heavy legs and boots. Kahlo is dressed in traditional Mexican clothes, while Rivera is depicted in a blue work shirt. The paint brushes and palette in Rivera’s hand signal he too is an artist. The couple’s hands only lightly touch at the center of the painting. In the top right corner of the painting, a bird carries a ribbon: “Here you see us, me, Frieda Kahlo, with my beloved husband Diego Rivera. I painted these portraits in the beautiful city of San Francisco California for our friend Mr. Albert Bender, and it was in the month of April of the year 1931.”
Background

In the early 1930s San Francisco, like the rest of the nation, was suffering the worst effects of the Great Depression. Unemployment was at staggering levels, and labor unrest threatened to boil over into the streets. Against this backdrop, a group of local artists and patrons approached Mexican painter Diego Rivera, then at the height of his fame, to create murals in San Francisco. A member of the Communist Party whose work was known for biting political content, Rivera’s selection generated controversy, even as he and his wife, artist Frida Kahlo, became local celebrities. Their arrival, together with support of art by local patrons and New Deal government agencies, energized the local art scene and spawned a creative burst of public art in the Bay Area.

Frida Kahlo painted this famous portrait of the couple in San Francisco while Rivera was working on mural commissions in the City. Kahlo dedicated the portrait to their friend and patron, Albert Bender. A San Francisco businessman, Bender is the most important and influential local art patron of the early 20th century. Bender cultivated personal relationships with artists of all types: painters, sculptors, photographers, and musicians. He consistently championed progressive, cutting-edge artistic expression. Figures as diverse as Ansel Adams and Frida Kahlo benefitted from his support, as did local museums.

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were married in 1929. While magnetic, their relationship was troubled and colored by numerous affairs. Kahlo often depicted her tumultuous relationship with Rivera, as well as her own personal struggles and weaknesses. Despite their difficult relationship, each respected the other’s art.

During her lifetime, Kahlo was often eclipsed by her husband. Today she stands on her own, as an artist who pushed the boundaries of her time, and idolized as a cultural figure who openly acknowledged her struggles and rejected conventional standards. Her influence is far reaching. Her artwork is everywhere—from posters and mousepads, to postage stamps. Her identity and personal story serve as inspiration for everything from Halloween costumes to Hollywood films featuring her tragic life and famous social circle.

Suggested Activities

Speech Bubbles

Have students look quietly at the artwork for three minutes. If helpful, provide prompts to encourage students to look closely. (E.g., What is going on in this portrait? What do you see that makes you say that? What details can you find about the two characters? What might these details reveal? What does it suggest about the relationship between the two figures?) Ask students to imagine a conversation between the two subjects in the painting. Provide a copy of the image to each student, and have students write the conversation they imagine.

Portraits

Have students create a double portrait, depicting themselves and another friend or family member. Begin by asking the student to identify a second subject (person), then ask students to consider what ties the two individuals together. What do they have in common? What do they like to do together? What is each individual like? What is their relationship or friendship like? Students should consider symbols and imagery that reflect the characteristics of each individual, and of their relationship. The symbols and imagery can be sketched out ahead of time, and then incorporated into the final portrait.
**ARTWORK SPOTLIGHT**

*Composition f.64* by Alma Lavenson  
1931  
gelatin silver print  
9.875 x 7.75 in  
Collection of OMCA, gift of the artist

**Description of Artwork**

*Composition f.64* captures a small glimpse of an industrial scene. While the viewer cannot see the entire scene, the frame yields hints of the larger landscape. Metal pulleys in front of a large metal tank are visible, and a steep staircase appears to run from the ground to the top of the metal tank. In the foreground is a chain link fence, with the sharp points exposed. A bright overhead light (the sun) casts dark shadows, creating a stark contrast between the light and dark tones in the composition.
Background

While Frida Kahlo’s husband, Diego Rivera, was painting murals in San Francisco, a group of photographers in Oakland was writing a manifesto for a new type of modernist photography. Members of Group f.64, which included Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Imogen Cunningham, forcefully challenged the traditional style of “pictorial” photography, which emphasized painterly qualities and hand-retouching. The group’s style of “pure” photography favored razor-sharp images with subtle tonal ranges. Sentimental or staged scenes were abandoned in favor of abstractions derived from everyday objects.

Alma Lavenson adopted Group f.64’s style of pure and unmanipulated photography, and was invited to join the inaugural exhibit at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1932. Spending the majority of her life in Oakland, Lavenson was heavily influenced by Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston. Like other photographers of Group f.64, Lavenson’s photographs depict details abstracted from a larger picture. Composition f. 64 demonstrates Lavenson’s interest in industrial subjects and machinery, highlighting geometric forms and the play of light and shadow.

Suggested Activities

Outside the Frame

Have students look at Composition f.64 for several minutes, imagining the scene around them as if they were present in the photograph. Ask students to look for details that might tell them where they are. In pairs, students describe where they think they are. What’s going on outside the frame of the photograph? What do you hear? Students can share their findings verbally, or in writing.

Zoom In/Zoom Out

Select an indoor or outdoor location for students to draw. The scene might be outside on the playground, a collection of still life objects on a table, a scene from a park, or a building. First ask students to draw the entire scene. Then, ask students to start a second drawing, focusing on a smaller piece from their original composition. (Small viewfinders can help students focus on a particular section of the composition. Materials such as an empty 35 mm slide mount, or a 4 x 4 inch cardstock square with the center cut out can be used as a viewfinder.)

Ask students to pay special attention to the details within their smaller view of the scene. What abstract or interesting shapes appear? Students can share their work with each other, reflecting on what they discovered when focusing on a smaller portion of the scene.
ARTWORK SPOTLIGHT

*Rehearsal* by David Park  
c. 1949–1950  
 oil on canvas  
46 x 35.75 in  
Collection of OMCA, gift of the Anonymous Donor Program of the American Federation of Arts

Description of Artwork

*Rehearsal* is painted from the perspective of someone standing at the back of a music group, looking out over the six figures in the composition. The figures are members of the Studio 13 Jazz Band, a music group founded by California School of Fine Arts instructors David Park and Elmer Bischoff. Moving from the foreground to the background, the artist depicts figures playing: a grand piano, upright bass, cornet, trombone, and drum set. The sixth figure appears to be playing an instrument, however the instrument is not visible. The seated figures parallel the line created by the edge of the piano, which is intersected by the line created by the upright bass.
Background
In the 1940s and 1950s, the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) had become a nationally recognized center for postwar Abstract Expressionist art, which then dominated the Bay Area art scene. Bay Area artists and art students were jolted by local exhibitions of recent work by Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and others. These exhibitions shook the assumptions of many artists, making them re-examine the expressive possibilities of painting.

Like most of the faculty at CSFA, David Park had been a committed abstract painter. As the decade drew to a close, he moved decisively toward a style that referenced the visual world rather than interpreting internal states of mind. Sometime in 1949, Park loaded a number of his abstract paintings into his car and drove them to the Berkeley dump. Park’s turnaround shocked and angered many of his colleagues. But in subsequent years more and more painters followed in his footsteps, initiating a figurative movement that became one of the region’s best-known contributions to art.

As artists working in a socially conservative time, the students and teachers at CSFA were natural allies of the emerging San Francisco counterculture of the 1950s. Like the Beat-era writers and poets, they shared a passion for the possibility of art based on direct expression and spontaneous creativity. Painters often showed work in coffee houses and restaurants, and music, particularly jazz, loomed large. The California School of Fine Arts even had a house band made up of faculty, the Studio 13 Jazz Band, which played at social gatherings.

Suggested Activities

Soundtrack
Have students spend a few minutes quietly looking at, encouraging them to visually explore as much of the artwork as possible. Ask students to imagine they are a part of the scene. In pairs or small groups, ask students to describe where they think they are. What do they hear? What instruments do they see? What do they sound like? How loud or soft? Is the music fast or slow? What is the energy or mood like? Probe students to support their statements, identifying visual clues. Ask students to select a song that represents the characteristics discussed in their pair or small group, sharing their reasoning behind their song selection.

Creative Collaboration
Ask students to think of a time they worked collaboratively on a creative project or performance (e.g., a concert, play, chalk mural, etc.). Have students discuss: who did you work with? What was it like to work together? Did you have fun, or was it hard? If there was a disagreement, how did you handle it? Ask students to think of something new they learned from working on the project or performance, and illustrate that new skill or lesson. Post the drawings together to create a class mural.
ARTWORK SPOTLIGHT

*Country Dog Gentlemen* by Roy De Forest
1972
painting, polymer on canvas
66.75 x 97 in
Collection of SFMOMA, gift of the Hamilton-Wells Collection

Description of Artwork

A group of dogs with bright, piercing eyes stare out at the viewer in *Country Dog Gentlemen*. This vividly colored fantasy world is filled with a jungle of imaginary plants and smaller creatures. Bold colors, organic shapes, patterns, and paint texture erupt from the flattened background.
A NEW ART DEPARTMENT AT UC DAVIS

Background

As the 1960s began, the University of California gave professor Richard L. Nelson the task of assembling a new studio art department for their Davis campus. Known as a sleepy agricultural college, UC Davis was undergoing an ambitious expansion, fueled by California’s population boom and government funding for higher education during the Cold War.

The faculty that Nelson put together included artists Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri, Wayne Thiebaud, Roy De Forest, and William T. Wiley. Although diverse in style and approach, the Davis faculty shared a similar mindset that has come to be known as “funk” art.

Rejecting the seriousness of much 20th century art, their work was unrefined, free-spirited, and embracing of popular culture. Left to pursue their own directions in the free atmosphere established by Nelson, the Davis artists mentored generations of students and made a truly original, and uniquely Californian, contribution to art.

A product of the 1960s, art at UC Davis often exhibited a humorous or satirical edge. Humor was aimed at the seriousness and perceived pretentiousness of the fine art world as much as at society and popular culture in general. An attitude of fun and experimentation with process became a path to a penetrating and wholly original artistic inquiry.

Roy De Forest once described his style as “Nut Art,” an approach that combined humor and personal fantasy worlds. Born in Nebraska, De Forest grew up in rural settings around farm animals. His whimsical and folk-inspired artworks often depict real and imaginary animals, arranged in free-form compositions.

Suggested Activities

People as Animals

Have students spend a few minutes looking at Country Dog Gentlemen. Roy De Forest once said that in his work he was “trying to create a world in which the principal actors [are] dogs...if you look closely you might be able to identify them as people you might know.” Ask students to identify a few friends and family members they would like to include in a portrait. Have students think about those individuals and their personalities. What animals would they choose to represent each person? Have students list and then draw the animals, representing their friends and family members in a group portrait.

This activity is adapted from a publication of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (for People as Animals).

3D Collage

While known primarily for his paintings, Roy De Forest used lots of colors, texture, and shapes that almost appear to pop off the canvas. Have students look at a few other works by De Forest, and then create 3D pop-up collages. Students can draw their own real and imaginary animals, create patterns using bold shapes and colors, as well as found images. Students can make certain animals and patterns “pop out” by using small strips of rolled or accordion-folded paper.
**ARTWORK SPOTLIGHT**

*Untitled* by Barry McGee  
mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Collection of SFMOMA, Ruth Nash Fund and Louis Vuitton N. A. purchase

**Description of Artwork**

In *Untitled*, Barry McGee brings together a large collection of smaller frames, which contain photographs, drawings, and other images. These smaller frames hold images created by McGee, some by his friends and family members, and some found images. The collection of frames is mounted to a bulbous wood frame, jutting out from the wall.
Background

San Francisco’s Mission District is rooted in its working class people, bohemianism, leftist politics, and ethnic diversity. The Latino community’s muralism and political graphics tradition inspired the link of art with the social good. In the 1990s, the Mission’s unique mix flourished with richness and vitality at the same time local and global events threatened its fabric.

Within this distinctive historical context and urban space, the Mission became the center for the region’s creative energy. A community-minded sensibility came together in response to the first dot.com boom’s gentrification and other struggles. Artists embraced populist values, drawing inspiration from bottoms-up culture (i.e., music, street graphics, craft, and experimental art forms) and common concerns.

Within a few years, artwork being made in the Mission attracted a national and international audience, and the artists were described in the art historical shorthand of a “Mission School.” This section expands the limited view to include a wider set of participants, and puts the Mission’s free flowing artistic activities into the history from which they emerged. This expansive conversation offers a palpable sense of the Mission District’s life in the 1990s in order to connect with social and cultural themes relevant today.

Barry McGee creates artwork made of many elements (made or found) that refer to graffiti, urban life, and art practices such as site-specific installation and Op Art, a painting style that emphasized geometric shapes. The artist first made *Untitled* for his SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) show at SFMOMA in 1996, and then expanded it with new elements in 2009. Aligned with the informal culture of the street, McGee’s work can sit uneasily in museums. This particular piece cartoonishly bulges from the wall to satirize the seriousness inherent in institutional settings, such as a museum or gallery. The overwhelming number of frames and images that make up *Untitled* parallels the chaos and overstimulation of everyday city life.

Suggested Activities

**Classroom Installation**

Show the image of Barry McGee’s *Untitled* to the class. As a group, discuss how McGee often reflects on issues facing the community through his artwork, and how *Untitled* includes the work of many different people. Ask students to identify issues currently facing your community. As a group, select one theme to explore together, highlighting different perspectives from community members. (Students could identify perspectives they’re already aware of, or gather perspectives as part of a larger research project.) As a class, design an installation for the classroom that reflects on or responds to the issue. Have each individual student contribute something for the final installation—or example a drawing, personal object, or photograph.

**Map Your Own Fertile Ground**

As a class, ask students where they see creativity in their community, and who inspires their own creativity. Using Google Maps or the outline of the Bay Area provided at the end of this packet, map your class’s creative community.
Houses a number of online interactives and media pieces, including artist interviews. Search by artist name, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Ansel Adams, Jackson Pollock, Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, and Barry McGee.

A recorded conversation where Smarthistory’s executive editors, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, discuss the details and story behind Frida Kahlo’s painting *Frieda and Diego Rivera*.

Online gallery from the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, which houses Alma Lavenson’s archives of photographs and negatives. Provides a larger sample of Lavenson’s photographs.

A summary of key art movements and figures in the San Francisco Bay Area, covering Abstract Expressionism, Bay Area Figurative, and art from the UC Davis faculty.

Playlist of 14 songs, by the Studio 13 Jazz Band. Courtesy of the Estate of Jon Schueler, and available on the SFMOMA website.

Di Rosa’s YouTube channel, which includes video clips from a recorded interview with Roy De Forest. Search for “Roy De Forest” to hear the artist talk about his own artistic process and use of animals.

Excerpt from Art21 episode “Place,” during which the show follows Barry McGee and his wife Margaret Kilgallen, both artists, around the Mission District of San Francisco. McGee and Kilgallen each discuss their artistic inspiration and process.
MAP YOUR OWN FERTILE GROUND
Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California is jointly organized by the Oakland Museum of California and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition is made possible in part by generous support from the Oakland Museum Women’s Board, OMCA Art Guild, SFMOMA’s Collectors Forum, Barclay and Sharon Simpson, Fisher Family, Pat Wilson, Quinn Delaney and Wayne Jordan, Frederick G. Novy and Susanna Novy MacDonald, the Helen Forster Novy Fund, and Nancy and Steven H. Oliver.

Additional support is provided by SFMOMA’s Bay Area Contemporary Arts Exhibition Fund, founded by Agnes Cowles Bourne, Ann Hatch/Clinton Walker Fund, Maryellen and Frank Herringer, Eileen and Peter Michael, Christine and Michael Murray, Paul Sack and Shirley Davis, Judy C. Webb, Anita and Ronald C. Wornick.