



VISTA POINT

Doing as much as possible with nothing at all was the secret to the success of *Vista Point*, a temporary, site-specific installation at the earthquake-damaged and soon-to-be-demolished de Young Museum, in San Francisco.

Vista Point, dismantled last March, consisted of 27 Hudson River School landscape paintings arranged in space so that, from several vantages within the gallery, their horizons met to form a continuous line; clouds and mountains and lakes seemed to jump from one canvas to the next as a viewer scanned the gallery. To achieve this illusion, the paintings (such as William Bradford's 1880 *Scene in the Arctic*, Thomas Moran's 1906 *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* and Albert Bierstadt's 1872 *View of Donner Lake*) were taken off the walls and set on top of pedestals at various heights.

Landforms and cloudscapes played and merged in the reflections from the Plexiglas cases that shielded the art. A sound track of train whistles, mixed with very low frequency booms made by magnetic fields sweeping the Earth and ambient noise taped in the neighborhood of the de Young, played continuously to bring the imaginary landscape to life.

When they first considered the project, the designers—Bruce Tomb, Kris Force and Jayne Roderick—realized that each had a very different relationship with the de Young. Force is a fan of the museum and its large collection of landscape paintings, but Tomb, an architect and designer best known for his Infinite Fitting line of sand-cast sinks, is a San Francisco native who had not been to the museum in about 15 years; Jayne Roderick, an artist-in-residence at Interval Research, can see the de Young from her apartment but had never set foot in it. "We realized that we formed a microcosm of the younger audience that the museum wanted to lure in with this exhibition," Tomb said. They lured in the jury, too. "We talked so much about exhibition design and materials and technology and language, but this is the only project that actually has a critical position about exhibitions," Ranieri said. "And it represents work that we are familiar with in a completely refreshing way. It's just surreal. The paintings become like windows, like portals."



Kris Force, left, is a professional sound designer and audio producer; she works with a "post-rock" ensemble called Amber Asylum and produces for the MTV interactive group, Jayne Roderick, right, studied music at the University College Cardiff, in the U.K., and is currently a member of the research staff at the Interval Research Corporation. Bruce Tomb, center, founded an independent architectural practice in 1998.

How did you decide to run together the horizon lines?

BT: San Francisco is going through some radical changes right now. There's a whole frontier craze related to the digital revolution and Silicon Valley. So it was a natural thing to take Kris's interest in the de Young's landscape collection and to think, "What relevance do these images have to us now? How can we transform them?" And that period of landscape painting was very much about how the frontier was cultivated, and about the role of the artist in giving that frontier an image. The artist was thought of as a player in the frontier.

The jury selected this project as an example of what designers can do when they look beyond digital bells and whistles. Did you intend it as a critique of technology?

BT: There's a really awkward, love-hate relationship with technology in it. Certainly, there's a critical aspect to this piece. There are certain ideas that have supposedly evolved out of the new technology: a way of seeing the world that is somehow implicit in being immersed in new technology. But you don't need to use the technology itself to express how it changes the way you see the world. And that's what this piece does:

It takes a Photoshop, cut-and-paste appropriation sensibility and uses it with genuine artifacts—the paintings. It is very much of that world of digital media, but it is in fact not using it.

Q: What does *Vista Point* have to say to designers of more traditional environments?

BT: I don't know how it works on the East Coast—and it may be a kind of West Coast thing—but the average person would say that the man-made environment is easy to distinguish from nature, that which has not been developed by man. At the same time, the natural landscape, which was in the past thought of as being wild—and certainly these paintings have etched into our psyche a kind of vision of the frontier—a wilderness—doesn't exist anymore. Yosemite is like Disneyland. One of the things that we're taught as architects in school is that to do good design you have to understand the context of a project-site analysis, and all these techniques to try to evaluate what's appropriate. I think our project offers up another way to think about that context.

CLIENT/COMPANY

M. H. de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; Glen Helland, guest curator.

CONSULTANT DESIGN

Bruce Tomb, Kris Force and Jayne Roderick, San Francisco, CA; Stacy Martin, Barbara Rowe, Jeremy Drucker, Lee Felsenstein, project team.

MATERIALS/FABRICATION

3/4" square tubular-steel frame, silicon caulking, 3/4" plate glass, Piezo ceramic transducers with lead shot and epoxy resin inertial backstops, 1/2" aluminum platform with salvaged iron legs, 2 steel guy wires and turnbuckles, 27 landscape paintings, 13 existing institutional vitrines, 2 benches.

HARDWARE/SOFTWARE

Sound recording: binaural headset microphone, stereo condenser microphone, ultrasonic "bat" detector, wire, cell-phone scanner, portable DAT recorder. Sound editing: Apple Power Macintosh G3, Digidesign Pro-Tools Audio, Bias Peak, Native Power Pack Filters. Sound production: 75-watt Piezo transducer disks, 40-watt subwoofer, speaker wire, CD player, 150-watt audio power amp, 12-channel mixer.