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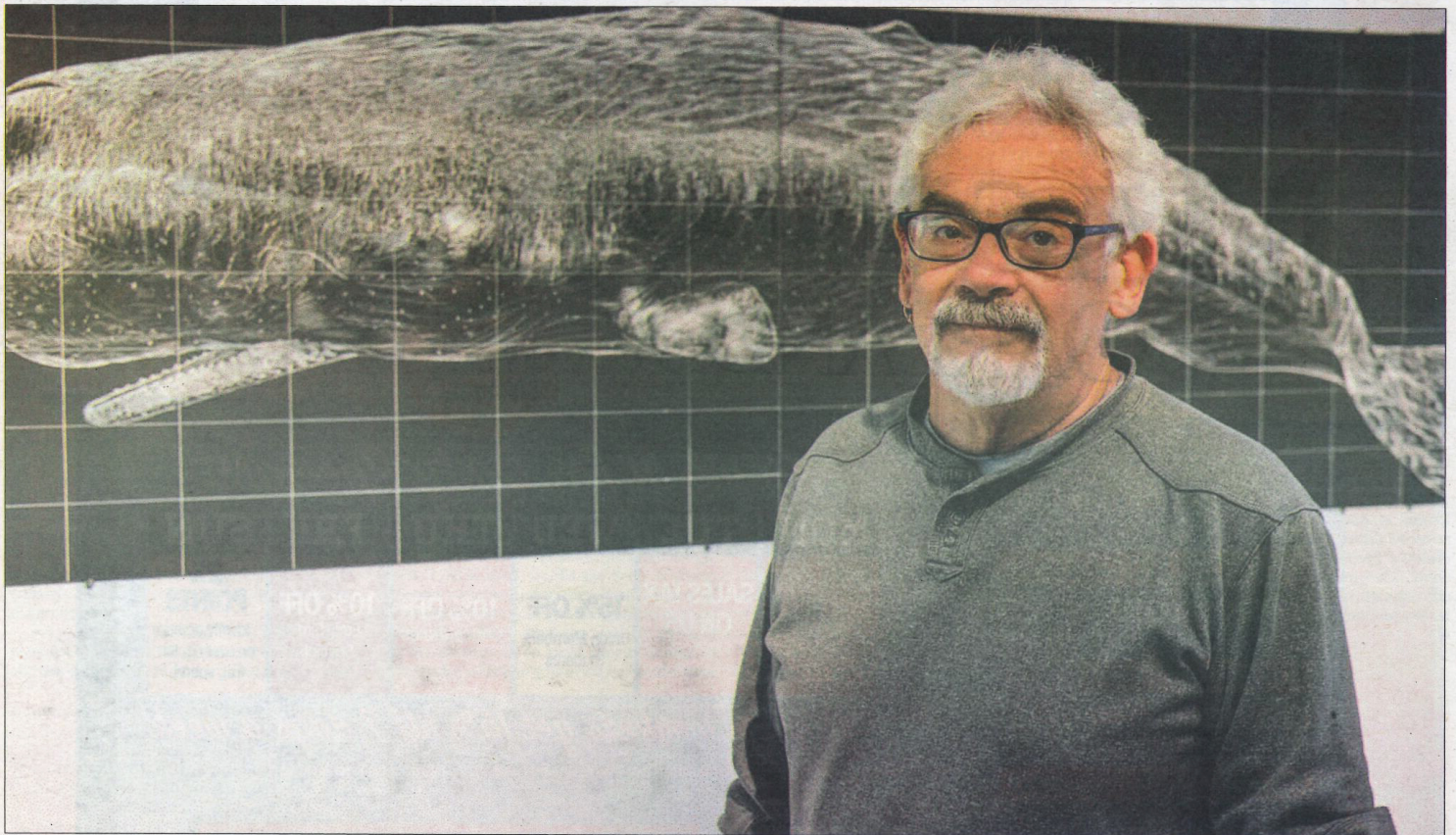
JOS SANCES' GREAT WHITE WHALE

Berkeley artist's monumental work
Or, the Whale reflects a lifetime and beyond.

PLUS

Get yourself to
Here Is the Sea.

ARTS & CULTURE



Sances' wife told him to make the work life size or not bother at all.

Photo courtesy Jos Sances

Jos Sances' Great White Whale

For years, Berkeley printmaker John Joseph "Jos" Sances was fascinated by Herman Melville's epic novel *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. During the four years in which Sances taught printmaking in Baja Mexico, he had often used tiny boats to visit breeding grounds in the Gulf of California where he would be surrounded by gentle gray whales. As a gift, his wife gave him a coveted 1930 edition of Melville's novel featuring the woodblock-style ink drawings by illustrator Rockwell Kent that are credited with helping to repopularize the once-overlooked masterpiece.

Sances read the book for a third time around the same time that he and his wife, the artist Robbin Henderson, visited the whaling museums of Nantucket and New Bedford. He was inspired to create a life-size scratchboard image of a sperm whale, whose body would encompass a dizzying number of images from American history. "I had a sense at that point of, 'Let's do the whale,'" he recalled.

It was only after retiring from his job as a

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By Janis Hashe

printmaker that Sances could even consider doing a piece that sprawling and obsessive. Still, once he did the math, he was taken aback

by how much it would cost to depict a life-size whale using scratchboard. Henderson offered to pay for the panels, however, and told him firmly, "If you don't do it full-size, don't bother."

So began Sances' nine-month journey in the intricate process of scratchboard, which uses kaolin clay, titanium white paint, and glue to produce black boards onto which images are "scratched" to reveal the white beneath. It is an artistic medium that deliberately contrasts with the historic use of whale bones and teeth in the carvings known as scrimshaw.

To the artist, the work that came to be known as *Or, the Whale*, currently on view at the Richmond Art Center, is about the human cost of unchecked capitalism and its destructive effects on the natural world. Yet the whale also symbolizes that world's ability to transcend humans. "Do whales even believe in us?" he asked in his exhibition notes.

In creating *Or, the Whale*, Sances abandoned his usual work mode, which involves planning everything out. By the time that a third of the panels were done, he was working very

instinctively, searching the Internet for images that would connect his story. "I couldn't tell you what the next image would be until I found it," he said.

Look carefully, Sances said, and you might spot a Donald Trump rally identifiable only by tiny lettering on buttons worn by attendees — although the president himself does not appear. On the other hand, the massacre of the indigenous Pequot people by Puritan settlers in 1637 is depicted, partly in homage to the *Pequod*, the ship's name in *Moby-Dick*, and partly, Sances said, "because we are all on the *Pequod* right now, dealing with this lunatic." Happy images include depictions of three smiling kids — Sances' grandchildren.

As Sances worked on the piece, Richmond Art Center Exhibition Director Amy Spencer learned about it. "I immediately wanted to see this work in progress," said Spencer, who was busy curating an artistic exhibition designed to investigate the troubled relationship between humans and nature. "I thought it fit really well with work by other local artists I was speaking to

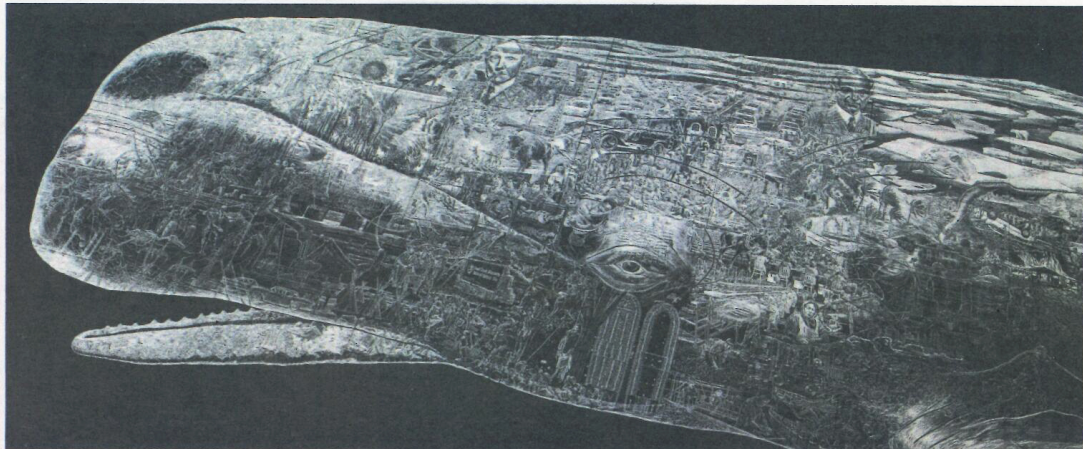
and eventually the whole show [*Here is the Sea*] developed around this piece." When Sances laid out the piece in one of the center's galleries it was the first time he'd seen his own entire work, as it was too large for his Berkeley studio. At that point, it was obvious to Spencer that something truly remarkable was coming into being.

"We're so happy that the Richmond Art Center could debut *Or, the Whale*," Spencer said. "We're currently speaking with other organizations about potentially touring the piece. Eventually this piece needs to be in a museum's collection."

The story of how *Or, the Whale* came to be is really the story of a lifetime spent in art.

Sances was born in Boston, and remembers watching his Sicilian great-grandfather paint. But it was attending Catholic school, where his undiagnosed dyslexia caused him to struggle with academic subjects, that set his course toward art. "One afternoon a week, all through school, we had art class, and I really excelled there," he recalled. "I won a prize every year."

He went on to attend the Montserrat School



The 14-by-51 foot piece covers an entire wall of the Richmond Art Center's main gallery, and took Sances eight months to complete. Photo courtesy Richmond Art Center

ART REVIEW

High Time to Get to Sea

Here is the Sea features a true masterpiece

By Janis Hashe

It is rare to walk out of an exhibit feeling stunned by what you've seen — even, or maybe especially, for serious art lovers. But that's not too strong a description of the experience of viewing *Or, The Whale*, an epic piece by Berkeley artist Jos Sances.

Part of the Richmond Art Center show *Here is the Sea*, Sances' life-size scratchboard drawing of a sperm whale contains within it an astounding pantheon of other images: surfers and the Point San Pablo whaling station, Native Americans and immigrants, corporate boardrooms and robber barons, Steve Jobs and Martin Luther King, Jr. among them. The 14-x-51-foot piece covers an entire wall of the main gallery and took Sances eight months to complete. Comments heard in the gallery from other viewers included, "a historically important piece," and "a tour de force."

Sances was inspired by Herman Melville's most famous book, the full title of which is *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. Gallery materials note that Sances has embedded "a history of capitalism in America" within the body of his whale. Part of the genius of this conception is that much of *Moby-Dick* itself also was about the interior of whales. But Sances's piece also depicts survival and nature's resilience despite humans' self-centered ravages. Like the novel, it is a masterpiece.

Though *Or, the Whale* literally dominates the exhibit, *Here is the Sea* has many more pleasures to offer. The exhibit's brochure notes that it was curated to "bring together artworks that use the ocean and its coasts as a site for investigating the fraught relationship between humans and nature. Richmond is a city with 32 miles of shoreline, and through this exhibition visitors to the Richmond Art Center are invited to reflect on what is at stake and what has already been lost in our local maritime



Oceans and Seas II, v3, 2016-19, sea grass, found strings, fishing nets, wood. By Dimitra Skandalis

environment."

Stephen Bruce's two large panels, *Cascade* and *Watershed* (acid on copper, 2017), evoke both the colors and movement of water. As viewers look closer, sparkles appear, like water shimmering over rocks or sand. In Christy Chen's video *I'm Here For You* (2019), we see dolphin statues spouting water, someone's lawn being watered, people doing yoga underwater, and then simply the sea's waves rolling endlessly toward us. The convoluted relationship of humans with water and the oceans is examined.

Littoral Demon II and *Littoral Demon III* by Tanja Geis (San Francisco Bay mud



Littoral Daemon II & III, 2015, San Francisco Bay mud in watercolor medium on paper. By Tanja Geis

in watercolor on paper, 2015) were inspired and partially created by flotsam and debris the artist found while walking the Bay Trail through the Richmond mudflats. The large images, reminiscent of Polynesian totems, incorporate "digital collages" of plastic cups, bags, and other items. Geis writes, "We can't make sensible decisions about the environment until we comes to terms with our impact."

Equilibrium (2017) is a series of photos taken by Marie-Luise Klotz from a boat just outside the San Francisco Bay, capturing the ceaseless variety of waves. Richard Lang and Judith Selby Lang manipulate images

of nefarious "nurdles" — the name for those tiny beads of plastic now found everywhere on shorelines and in the oceans — to make bizarrely beautiful prints that bring to mind an embryonic fish egg ... or the moon ... or a Petri dish. The archival inkjet prints (2010) *OMA 1*, *OMA 2*, and *Golden Seven* seem ominously removed from the actual nurdles, which the center's brochure calls "poisonous little bombs." Lang and Selby Lang play with perception again in their two *Nurdle Rings* (2014), gold bands in which diamonds have been replaced by nurdles.

Silk banners are imprinted with rust and water to create Katie Revilla's *Ingress* (2019). The artist hid buckets under the stair entrance to Angel Island Immigration Station to soak in which to soak the banners, commemorating the location her grandfather arrived at when he immigrated from the Philippines. **MISSING WORDS???** Decay, Revilla seems to imply, contains its own beauty.

The Richmond Art Center deserves great credit for the lighting of Dimitra Skandalis' "Oceans and Seas II, v3, 2016-19" **END QUOTE???** Fishing nets, nautical strings and seaweed are crocheted together to make this ethereal piece, whose shadow on the wall becomes part of the artwork. The artist sees it as a depiction of the "fragile networks" that are the seas' ecosystems.

The five short videos that comprise the contribution from the Love the Bulb artists' group were all filmed at the Albany Bulb, a mile-long landfill poking out from the East Bay shoreline that has become an art space and garden. The videos run the gamut from a solo dance executed on what look like wood pallets by Tapper Dan, to musical artist Evie Ladin's "MoToR/dance," to violinist Hannah Young with dancers Alex Lau and Jocelyn Reyes. (Note that the annual "Bulbfest" happens May 5.)

Here is the Sea will stay with you for a long time. And perhaps your dreams, like those of Melville's Ahab, will be haunted by a whale.

Here is the Sea, through May 17, free, Richmond Art Center, 2540 Barrett Ave., Richmond, 510-620-6772, RichmondArtCenter.org

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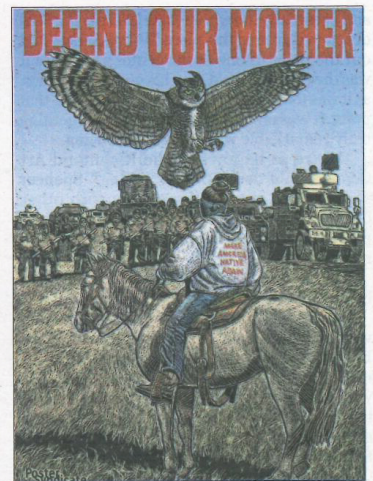

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Sances turned his profession of printmaking into the foundation of his art, which is often politically oriented. Images courtesy of Jos Sances



of Visual Art in Beverly, Mass., and began painting as an abstract expressionist. "When I moved to San Francisco after the Vietnam War, I realized I wanted to make art that was narrative and political," he said.

Yet he also wanted it to be accessible. Since no one he knew could afford to buy paintings, Sances turned to printmaking, a career that kept him busy as both a craftsman and artist for nearly 40 years. In 1980, he co-founded Mission Grafica at the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, moving on from there to found Alliance Graphics in Berkeley, a union shop from which he just retired. During all those years, he continued to create his own art, screenprints inspired by both politics and nature, and public art, including painted and tile murals. Describing himself as a "community collaborator," he painted murals at the Oakland Coliseum and created tile murals at the Amtrak/BART station in Richmond, and the 16th Street BART station in San Francisco, among many others. In 2010, alongside longtime art partner Daniel Galvez, he completed a 7,000-foot mural for the recreation center at Oakland's Ira Jenkins Park. Many of the pieces depict actual people, and some of the older pieces show individuals whose children and grandchildren now continue to view them, something he treasures.

Far from feeling his graphics work impeded his own "pure" artistic output, he offered advice to young artists starting out. "I never had a

gallery. But I made a good living, used my art skills and never felt I was shortchanged." Most artists will not end up "going the gallery route," he said, yet that doesn't mean they can't find a way to earn a living creatively.

Not surprisingly, the political provocation of much of Sances' work has generated backlash from time to time. He laughed as he remembered some of the comments his ceramic sculpture "Trump Tower" caused at the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomonca, Calif. He laughed even more telling the story of a print he did years ago, a parody of Andres Serrano's famous *Piss Christ* that depicted segregationist Sen. Jesse Helms and titled *Piss Helms*.

"It was supposed to be in a show about censorship — and they censored it!" he said, explaining that he then wheatpasted the image on the show building, at which point they relented and the piece was included. The controversy reached Helms' native state of North Carolina, and Sances was invited to Charlotte, where he managed to wheatpaste the image on Helms' campaign headquarters before getting out of town. Quickly.

As a founding member of the Great Tortilla Conspiracy, which produces "satirical edible art screenprinted with chocolate on tortillas," inspired by the strange tendency of deities to manifest themselves on food items, he looks forward to spontaneous eruptions of tortilla printing. "I have some tortillas that are 15 years old," he said proudly. "My archive is about 300."

It's embarrassing for Sances to hear *Or, the Whale* described as a masterpiece, but the image elicits that description from many. *Here is the Sea* opened March 26 and *Or, the Whale* has proved a stellar attraction. A full-length feature about Sances and the work recently appeared in the Italian cultural magazine *la Repubblica* titled "Nel Ventre della Balena" ("In the Belly of the Whale").

Even so, "masterpiece" is a word Sances balks at. "I love that people are having these amazing reactions to it," he said. "But it takes time to decide whether a work has the gravitas to deserve that description."

Decide for yourself before *Here is the Sea* closes on May 17.



Sances uses tortillas as a palette for a series of work. Photo courtesy of Jos Sances

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