SAMPLING OAKLAND
SAN FRANCISCO

"There is no there there," Gertrude Stein famously wrote of her childhood home—Oakland, California. Interpreted as a snarky comparison between the ex-pats beloved by Paris and an unrefined, young city, her comment became shorthand for backward small towns across America. What Stein actually meant was that, during a trip home, she found Oakland changed beyond recognition. The place of her childhood had vanished, except in her memory. Since Stein's visit seventy years ago, Oakland has weathered many more seismic shifts: an economic crash following WWI; decades of urban blight and racial tension; and now, a divisive gentrification campaign.

Despite its flaws, Oakland is both beloved by long-time residents and attractive to creative types fleeing San Francisco's sky-high rents. Over the past decade, artists have transformed derelict bakeries and slot machine factories into galleries, performance spaces, and live-work collectives.

The exhibition Sampling Oakland offers a snapshot of this flourishing grassroots arts scene [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA); July 15—October 8, 2006]. Co-curated by the directors of Oakland's most prominent artist-run spaces—21 Grand, Black Dot Collective, Ego Park, Lobot, Mama Buzz, and Oaklandish—the show reveals how refreshing and provocative art can be when its creators aren't chained to an art-market assembly line. Since YBCA's organizing curator Berni Golonu gave the co-curators free rein, the selected works' shared preoccupation with urban space and history, both real and imagined, can be seen to reflect the local zeitgeist rather than a curatorial agenda.

Erik Groff's arresting Temple of Life (Homage to A.G. Rizzoli), 2006, casts a utopian mood. A floor-to-ceiling cityscape of painted cardboard and dumpster detritus—think Red Grooms' sculpto-pictorama—Temple depicts a decaying Oakland that contains the seeds of its possible rebirth. Groff tagged his decrepit temple-city with Masonic imagery like double-headed eagles and mottoes such as Spes Mea in Deo Est (My hope is in God). At the heart of this installation lies a Masonic temple, suggested by two pillars and a cardboard awning emblazoned with the sign "Great is Cheops," referring to Khufu, the pharaoh who commissioned the Great Pyramid of Giza. Masonry's goal is to build the candidate as a temple—remember Gremaster 3? Here, it also provides a recipe for civic revitalization. The Rosetta stone to the installation is Achilles Rizzoli, a quirky San Francisco draftsmen who made highly detailed drawings of fantastical cathedrals and towers that he considered symbolic portraits of friends and family. Thus, Temple's system triangulates body with architecture, architecture with poles, and poles with body.

Both aspire to show that an enlightened body produces a united pols and warns that a blighted pols reflects its benighted inhabitants.

The class and race tensions implied in Temple come to the fore in Black Dot Collective's A Shrine To The Anti-Gentrification Gods of Oakland, May They Protect Us From the Invaders, 2006. Some view outgoing mayor Jerry Brown's gentrification initiatives as a way to drive out a broad spectrum of minorities. Seven-foot-tall letters, constructed from cast-off wood, doors, and corrugated metal, spell the word "Oakland." Festooned with nails, thumbtacks, bottles of colored powder, voodoo recipes, and "No Trespassing" signs, a Shrine both subverts African-American stereotypes and uses ritual elements from African diasporic cultures. Its neighbor, Bruce Busby's Creativity Enhancement Shelter #CMBD 702, 2002, shifts the debate to socioeconomic and countercultural minorities also deeply impacted by gentrification. Based on Busby's pseudo-science, a silvery-white, teepee-like camping tent provides a filtration system to protect the user from the fictional, creativity-inhibiting compound OP2.

Other works cast Oakland's history as an intricately woven tapestry of stories. In Veronica De Jesus' series of pen-on-paper portraits entitled A Handful of Sins, Pretty

Special People, 2004-2006, the artist memorializes those who have lived in or passed through the city, from academic celebrity Jacques Derrida to homegrown teacher Dr. Curtis Barefoot. Jeff Hult's must-see video montage A Local Love Retrospective, 2006, transforms silent film clips, 1950s newsmasts, and TV news footage into a unique version of Oakland's past century. Here, minorities are the up-from-nothing victors over the white power structure.

Self-propelled vehicles star in Mads Lynne's two-minute videos Car, 2006, and Shopping Cart, 2006. Car features a driverless Toyota Corolla on a spin around Oakland's abandoned, weed-infested warehouse district. It's shown on a monitor in front of a banner-sized photo of a graffiti-covered brick wall, which itself appears in the video. This locates the viewer simultaneously inside the filmed urban landscape, and outside of it—as a voyeur watching a film. Similarly, a food-filled cart rolls itself through Safeway in the second video, shown on a monitor that sits on a simulated grocery store shelf stocked with food. Lynne's homage to Robert Smithson's A Walk in the Park foregrounds the notion that a site—here, Oakland—is a sprawling entity with no focal point. Though Oakland, or any place for that matter, is ultimately unknowable, Lynne's video coaxes the viewer to consider the city from multiple perspectives.

The show's shortcomings are primarily spatial: Sampling Oakland deserved YBCA's much larger first-floor gallery. Instead, it's confined to the smaller second floor. Fortunately, Golonu realized that there was so much more in Oakland that a sequel is in the pipeline. Stay tuned for YBCA's East Side Story, opening this October.

—Eleanor LeBeau

ABOVE: Erik Groff, Grand Ave. If don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' no babies!, 2003, mixed media, variable dimensions (courtesy of the artist and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)