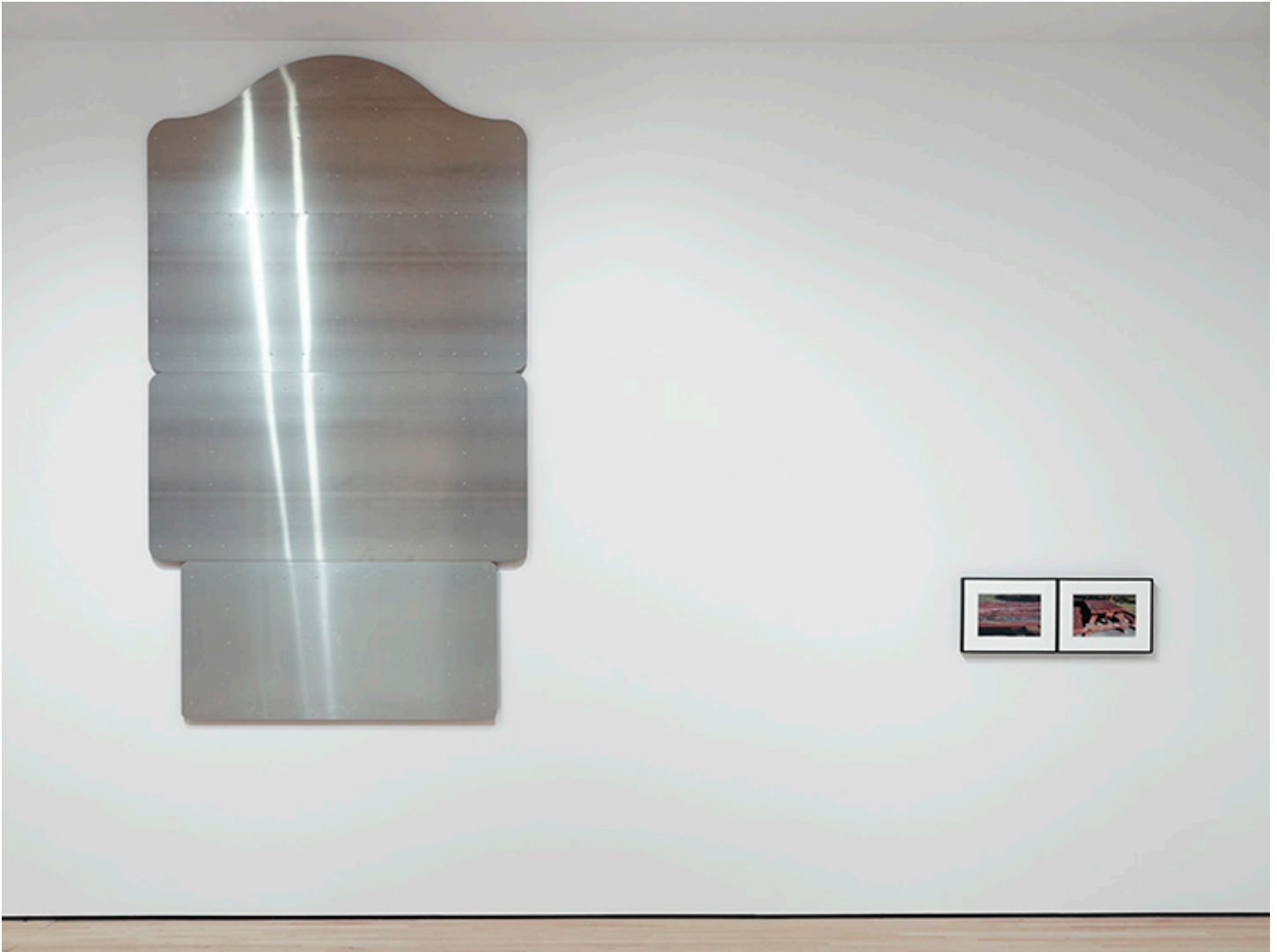


## No Point of View Overlooked in Park McArthur's 'New Work'

By Sarah Hotchkiss | APRIL 13, 2017



The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art recently sent out a survey. On one page, it asked, “Please select any artist whose work you would be interested in seeing in a special exhibition.”

Ignoring the woeful number of female and non-Western artists among the 18 options, only four living artists were included as practitioners whose work the public would theoretically like to see. Don’t get me wrong — like most, some my favorite artists are dead artists — but sometimes you want your visual culture to reflect the here and now, to come from a time and place that affects your own perception of the everyday, and challenges you to alter your view of the world.

Thankfully, SFMOMA’s ongoing *New Work* series exists to show new bodies of work by contemporary artists in a dedicated gallery space on the museum’s fourth floor. The latest comes from New York-based artist Park McArthur: a group of photographs and wall-mounted sculptures that question the use and accessibility of public spaces — from highways to parks to campfires — and how language, through its presence or absence, creates social conditions in those spaces.

Forty blank aluminum signs of varying shapes, the likes of which tell California drivers about areas of interest, recreation or cultural import, dominate the walls of the exhibition. Mounted back to back, half of the signs sit

flush against the gallery walls. Up close and viewed from a stationary position, the anodized metal shapes become minimalist monuments stripped of their welcome messages, physically overwhelming next to McArthur's small framed works.

The series' title, *Softly, effectively*, references a statement from the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* that imparts to roadside signs a sense of agency and civic pride: "As the direct means of communication with the traveler, traffic control devices speak to us softly, yet effectively and authoritatively."

Throughout the exhibition, McArthur's works allow inanimate objects to speak, asking the viewer to evaluate how different points of view affect our understanding of that language.

This analysis is most pointed in McArthur's reflection on the museum's own spaces and materials. With *Designation*, she mounts surplus maple floorboards against the wall with their underside facing out, showing how they would fit together to expand the museum's square footage.

In *Bohetta (for Beverly)*, she isolates two bricks of black granite removed from SFMOMA's original atrium. Again, the artwork title contains layers of meaning. "Bohetta" is a catchy portmanteau of Mario Botta, architect behind the building's 1995 design, and Snøhetta, the firm responsible for its 2016 expansion. "Beverly" is the late sculptor and earthworks artist Beverly Buchanan, who marked sites of loss and violence in the American South with pieces she often titled "ruins."

One brick, mounted on the exhibition's title wall, bears an inscription meant for SFMOMA employees who stuck with the museum during its years of closure and construction. "Thank you for stepping up and building our future," it says, optimistically.

What would be a casual figure of speech to the able-bodied takes on new meaning in the context of McArthur's exhibition, which contains her 2013 photograph *How to get a wheelchair over sand* and *Ramp Scheme 160 Main Street*, a detailed drawing made by her grandfather. In both pieces, McArthur's wheelchair is the absent subject. The ad-hoc and permanent pathways created to facilitate her entry into social spaces (a residency campfire and a family friend's home, respectively) document both the obstacles to participation and the materials that smooth those obstacles into spaces of transition.

*Overlook Park 1-5*, the last group of works in the show, revels in the double-meaning of the word "overlook." McArthur's camera circles a non-ADA-compliant picnic table, taking in the boundaries between grass, concrete and wood from a slight distance — a documentary evaluation that doesn't fit the square, level, dispassionate framing one might expect from conceptual photography.

Everything speaks — whether through its naming or its materials or its construction. The trick, as McArthur's work guides us to understand, is to move beyond a one-on-one conversation with a given object, monument or space to imagine alternate points of view, larger, more inclusive conversations, and new modes of gathering — goals all more easily accomplished with the living instead of the dead.

*'New Work: Park McArthur' is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Aug. 27, 2017.*