

Painting the Store Red

By Rachel Swaby
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The International Orange Commemorative Store is perched under the Golden Gate Bridge, where the only thing for sale is an experience.

The Golden Gate Bridge just celebrated its 75th birthday. There were boat parades and bands and an impressive fireworks show. But tucked under a span of the bridge's South side, inside a building once tasked with protecting the city behind it, a quieter tribute was taking place.

As a part of the “International Orange” exhibit, 16 artists are displaying work at Fort Point to toast the bridge. Paper dresses, photographed sea creatures, and a real-time sound installation will occupy parts of the historic building’s chilly barracks through October 2012.

Among them is Stephanie Syjuco’s “International Orange Commemorative Store,” a gift shop in which every item on offer is dipped in the bridge’s iconic orangey-red paint. It’s a place where everything is familiar, but nothing is quite right.

It’s a souvenir store with a twist. “What is the most disconcerting is that there are no images on things,” says Syjuco. Apart from that iconic orange marking each and every object, there is no branding to speak off.”

The range of products on display is also slightly absurd: Pencils, keychains, and earrings sit atop a table. An Eames

chair is perched on a stand to the left. Lined up on shelves against the back wall are mugs, pillows, plate sets, and bottles of unidentified red sauce. “I tried to overdo it,” says Syjuco. “There’s wine, deodorant, car air fresheners — it gets crazy.”

But that initial impression of excess is just for show. None of the color-splashed items, as it turns out, are actually for sale. The only souvenir you’re allowed to take home is a bridge-colored postcard — one of 50,000 made for the exhibit — offered for free.

The experience is one you can’t pay for. (get it?) But there’s also a simpler reason you wouldn’t want to open your wallet: “A lot of the packaging is empty,” says Syjuco. “The store is a giant prop.”

That set was created over the course of five months with the help of half a dozen local vendors and several assistants. Together they constructed, painted, and labeled thousands of items — many by hand.

Syjuco also enlisted Heath Ceramics to create a set of vibrant dinnerware for the installation as well as a local fashion designer and a screen printer to help with the clothing and tote bags. It turned out to be a pretty extreme craft project.

Before the making got underway, Syjuco had to source the paint color (which, by the way, is no longer International Orange). “The color actually changed,” explained Syjuco in a video produced for the For-Site Foundation. “This [work] is based on the actual paint, which is a custom mix just known as Golden Gate Bridge.”

Where do you go to get Golden Gate Bridge? Syjuco ventured out onto the pedestrian walkway and kindly asked a painter for a sample. With bounty in hand, the artist then headed over to Sherwin-Williams to get a match.

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The good news: the paint maker just so happened to be the Golden Gate’s official color supplier. The bad news: The color is a special order for industry, mixed up in 500-gallon batches. But Sherwin-Williams obliged with a five-gallon sample in a matched color to cover all the work Syjuco was planning to do by hand.

But when it came to printing the postcards, dyeing the material, glazing the ceramics, and screen-printing the T-shirts, each manufacturer made their own approximation of the bridge’s hue. “Everyone’s interpretation of the color swatch is different,” explains Syjuco. “There is not an equivalent Pantone.” To most of us with untrained eyes, the exhibit will just look like one gloriously ruddy homage to the Golden Gate Bridge. For Syjuco, the color with all its variants, “has grown on me,” she says.



Keychains and canned food: just a few of the blank items on display at Stephanie Syjuco’s shop.

It's a good thing, too. As the San Francisco native was elbow deep in paint in preparation for the bridge's birthday, she was also preparing for her own, which lands on the same date.

"Apart from just the color," says Syjuco. "The bridge and I have had a long-term relationship."