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SAFE Haven

An unprecedented NEW S.F. show POSITS global questions that hit CLOSE to home

> “It’s always a fine line—as far as what comes first,” says celebrated curator Cheryl Haines. “The idea is the artist or the site.” As founding executive director of San Francisco-based arts nonprofit For-Site Foundation, Haines has ample experience with talent and tourist attractions of the highest caliber (see: last year’s “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” for which the groundbreaking Chinese artist took over the federal penitentiary). This month she stages another logistical coup at Fort Winfield Scott, a collection of defunct military structures, some of which are set to open to the public for the first time, in S.F.’s urban national park, The Presidio.

Engaging what Haines terms “the fear of the other,” “Home Land Security” comprises works from 16 contemporary artists installed in five sites including decommissioned gun batteries and a military chapel. Both beautiful and sobering (as you might expect a bluff-top World War II defense post near the Golden Gate Bridge to be), the coastal setting uniquely fortifies the show’s themes of surveillance, safety, ideology and cultural misunderstanding.

The lineup spans L.A. and South Africa-based artist Liza Lou’s Barricade, a gatelike aluminum sculpture covered in 24-karat gold beads (“it neither protects or prevents,” says Haines); to Syrian painter Tamman Azzam’s triptych of war-torn cityscapes; and S.F. sculptor Al Farrow’s Mosque III (2010), a chilling representation of the National Mosque of Nigeria, constructed with decommissioned missiles and bullets.

Breathtaking tension is a Haines hallmark, but even as she forces viewers into a discomfort zone with her careful selection of thoughtful and defiant pieces, her ultimate pursuit is basic human understanding. “At the end of the day, we all just want the same things,” she says. “Home, family, security, respect—it’s all valid, it’s all vital.” On view Sept. 10-Dec. 18; for-site.org.

LEILANI MARIE LABONG