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Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer lights up SFMOMA fete

By Catherine Bigelow | February 15, 2017



Photo: Drew Altizer

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Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer created heartbeat-pulsed bulb centerpieces for SFMOMA Director's Circle Dinner Feb. 8, 2017.

At the recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Director's Circle Dinner, everyone coveted the bulb "centerpieces" lining long tables in Schwab Hall. These beauties — fantastical,

illuminated biometric sculptures — were specially created for the fete by featured artist **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer**. But guests were warned: “Mitts off!”

Whereas at luncheons, attendees might “win” the vase via a number taped under their teacup, at some black-tie soirees, including this one, it’s considered gauche to whisk away the well-crafted centerpiece.

The bulbs are lit by the pulse of 350 heartbeats that this electronic artist recorded in cities around the world, including Donetsk, Ukraine; Lima, Peru; and Basel, Switzerland.

“We record the heartbeat of people participating in my biometric pieces and reuse their pulse in our installations,” explained Lozano-Hemmer. “My work is typically large-scale, featured in museums or shows. This is (the) first time ‘Pulse’ has been created for such an intimate scale.”

Lozano-Hemmer, whose “Pulse Room” debuted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2006 to rave reviews, was hailed like an old friend as a number of guests had met him last year in Mexico City on a Director’s Circle art tour — one that, many enthused, was the museum’s best so far.

Led by Director’s Circle President **Patricia Fitzpatrick** and dinner chairwoman **Kim Morton**, the glowing evening featured a McCalls dinner that paid culinary homage (chicken with cheese gorditas in pipián verde sauce; Mexican chocolate mousse; post-dinner churros with tres leches sauce) to Lozano-Hemmer’s native Mexico City.

“I know his work and was determined to have something fresh but nonfloral for this dinner. This is an art museum, after all,” said Morton, of table decor. “Rafael is so energetic, very creative and he puts the fun back in art-making.”

This annual dinner, more akin to a family gathering, also allows SFMOMA Director **Neal Benezra** to honor the museum’s stalwart, deep-pocketed Director’s Circle donors.

Raising her glass, Morton toasted: “There are three facts you need to know about Rafael: He has a degree in physical chemistry. There are five miles of cables underneath each table. And

Rafael's parents were nightclub owners, so he knows good art is a party. But don't be fooled — his art is also hard-hitting and evocative."

Lozano-Hemmer then toiled through what he described as "just 5 percent" of his work to ensure he'd be invited back to SFMOMA.

"Media art is something that's inevitable: Our war, our economy, our love, our communication — it's all conducted through globalized networks," he outlined. "It's only natural, it's only normal, that contemporary artists should use this very same media to reflect poetically or critically on our times."

His rapid-fire delivery was also peppered with zingers, such as "forgetting" to warn guests about his origins: "Oh, I should've mentioned, I'm a Mexican. I'm one of the 'bad hombres.' But I live in Canada now. Mexicans there, we call ourselves 'Chic-Anadians.' So I'm probably doubly evil in Trump's eyes."

He also explained that in addition to the usual suspects ("You know, **Frida Kahlo**, and that's awesome"), experimental media art is a long-practiced Latin American tradition.

"Unknown to many, we have backdrops of experimentation that I assign to myself and my studio," he said. "The Bautista poets of the '20s were the first to use broadcast radio for their manifestos. Or that the theory of cybernetics was postulated at the National Institute of Cardiology in Mexico City. Or that the first color TV was patented by **Guillermo González Camarena**."

At the talk's conclusion, five guests were invited onstage for some real-time technological theater. Placing their hands on a recording device, their hear rates lit up the pulsing tabletop centerpieces and will be included in Lozano-Hemmer's future work.

Bidding dazzled guests goodnight, Benezra noted that museums are fantastic venues to ask questions, keep conversations going and find the good in each other, no matter your viewpoint.

"But I think tonight," he enthused, "is the most fun I've ever seen people have at a Director's

Circle Dinner!”

Mod redux: Dapper gallerist **Martin Muller** recently debuted the 3.0 version of his storied Modernism Inc. gallery with a **Gottfried Helnwein** exhibition, “Red Harvest,” at his new 724 Ellis St. location.

We won’t attempt to thumbnail Helnwein’s always provocative work. But let’s just say it was picture perfect for the dark, stormy night of Muller’s Tenderloin launch.

Muller, a devout Swiss perfectionist, worried he should’ve waited another week, or month, to open as, earlier that day, he was still deep in moving boxes. But the new space, cozy with a dash of edge, is spit-spot and features works by such Muller-repped old pals as **Jaques Villeglé**, **Charles Arnoldi** and the late **Mark Stock**.

Blue box: Tiffany & Co. unveiled its glamorous new boutique updo with great fanfare, celebrating its 25th anniversary on Union Square and 50th year in San Francisco.

Tom Carroll, the company’s Northwest vice president, welcomed guests, many draped in the distinct hue of the storied jeweler’s robin egg blue as the McCalls crew served a cocktail-klatch — sourced from nonstaining, white-based edibles and sparkly pale Dom Perignon.

Yet most beelined to vitrines shimmering with an array of classic Tiffany designs adorned with sapphires and diamonds and the new Lady Gaga HardWear Collection.

Fans of the San Francisco Ballet were out in force, led by Ballet principal dancer **Yuan Yuan Tan**, whose autograph graces a ballet slipper, currently on display, that will be placed in a new Tiffany time capsule. (Tiffany recently sponsored the Ballet season-opening gala.)

Guests delighted in a “Blue Box” photo booth for prom-style photos, and at night’s end were wowed with a special performance by 16-year-old **Spencer Barnett**, a local teen sensation who, on Feb. 17, was set to debut his Spotify single, “Cherry Lips.”