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PICKS

Cuba: Beauty and Decay

"The pleasure of ruins" was Rose Macaulay's term for the Schadenfreudian contemplation of ancient ruins by vertical visitors/readers. We *norteamericanos* may vicariously enjoy Cuba's picturesquely crumbling colonial architecture (partly a byproduct of fifty years of US sanctions), but Vivian Stephenson has a deeper appreciation, paying homage to her country's four centuries of culture mash-up in digital photographs of the palaces, forts, churches, and plazas of Havana, Trinidad, and Sancti-Spiritus: Morro Castle, the House of the Pious Deeds, Church of the Santo Angel Custodio, the Cathedral Plaza, Havana Cathedral (an imitation of Borromini's Italian Baroque church in Rome and "music carved in stone," according to writer Alejo Carpentier), the Old Stock Exchange, the National Theater, the Ursuline Palace, Central Park, the Capitol, and the monastery of San Francisco de Asis. Notes by Carlota Caulfield. **Cuba: Beauty and Decay** runs through December 13 at **Mills College Art Museum** (5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland). 510-430-1264 — D.C.

George Pfau

The old battle between representation and abstraction is over:

Detail of George Pfau's "Transamerica."



DeWitt Cheng

It's a Pyrrhic tie. Contemporary artists generally believe neither in traditional realism nor in painterly epiphany, so mixing modes is no longer taboo.

George Pfau's paintings combine banal news photos (to which he adds satirical touches), architectural/mechanical diagrams, abstract patterns from partially retraced photos, and pure, brushy paint. The hybrid matrices suggest Dada-collage fragments/inclusions emerging from the wreckage of colliding cultural systems, or fossils unearthed by temblors. In "Transamerica," a gorilla

that has pinioned two men to the ground gazes at a yawning seagull; floating above are a bald eagle, a roundtable of business execs, a bird-clawed triskelion, and SF's pyramidal landmark. In "Old-Fashioned Domestication," a motley crew erects, Iwo-Jima-style, a seemingly weightless Trojan horse and (why not?) apatosaurus, flanked by cartoon-figure totem poles set before an archaeological-dig background. **George Pfau** runs through January 12 at **Latham Square** (1611 Telegraph Ave., Oakland). 510-763-4361 or ProArtsGallery.org/exhibitions — D.C.