

ACTIVE VERBALIZATIONS

Engagé Art — and non-Art — in San Francisco

by Lydia Matthews

In a solo exhibition at Southern Exposure, Armando Rascon presented *Existential Monochrome*, an installation addressing both the limitations and possibilities of doing activist work in a gallery context. Rascon acknowledged the restrictions of his institutional framework by branding the gallery walls and floor with three large monochrome lines, drawing attention to the space as a neutralized, whitewashed stage. In the center of the room a flashing red siren light, signifier of danger, spun but remained disturbingly mute. In fact, a raging silence permeated the entire space, its urgency heightened by the word "electroencephalograph" painted on the floor, as if to encourage viewers to monitor their thoughts with heightened sensitivity.

On one wall Rascon superimposed a series of utopian slogans onto black leather paintings of cosmic forms. The words presented an inventory of 1960s radical jargon — "make love not war", "revolutionaries, one more effort to be nihilists", "smash the state" — phrases that not only appear clichéd but dated and impractical, given our current social reality. And yet, the way these paintings have been painstakingly rendered implies a thoughtful meditation on what it meant to have come of age in a time when radical political struggle and utopian revolution was business as usual.

"Facing Off/Bay Area
Pragmatic Strategies for
Times" at SF Camera
"S & L: Transactions in
Era" at the San Francisco
Armando Rascon at S

On the opposing wall, documents of famous court expectations about civil lit V. Wade, Brown v. Board Richard Nixon, along with the suit brought against artists whose N.E.A. grant What is most striking about they make visible a largel cess, one that is surprising human in tone. These art reminder that it is possible social systems to bring about have to accept the dictate reality nor succumb to rot which are doomed to fail. *Existential Monochrome* f activist work: it inspires gallery more eager to participate than simply consuming the

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Armando Rascon, *Existential Monochrome*
1991, Installation view
Photo: Ben Blackwell

