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## [Johnson captures melody amid cacophony](#)

- [Kenneth Baker](#)

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Bay Area photographer Eirik Johnson has an eye for improbable sights in bleak places.

The Rena Bransten Gallery samples images from two series of works by him titled "Borderlands" and "West Oakland Walks."

The best of his pictures subject chance discoveries to sharp formal decision making. Images of unobvious yet undeniable richness result, such as "Untitled (fence)" (2003).

Here his camera looks out across a Northwest tidal plain where apparently the rising and receding water has left a grand assemblage of detritus entangled in a fence of chain-link and barbed wire.

The picture's narrow palette of grays and greens makes it look almost like a black and white print. It speaks of social waste and environmental neglect but also of the modern arts' consoling effect on our eyes. The sculpture of Richard Stankiewicz, Mark di Suvero and Anthony Caro, among others, has taught us to read visual melody in the factual cacophony that "Untitled (fence)" describes.

Art-consciousness seems to pervade Johnson's pictures. His "Blue Car, Blue Building" (2002) brings Robert Bechtle irresistibly to mind. Anyone conversant with installation art will think of its liberties reflexively to account for the found oddities in "Untitled (sweater)" (2004), "Untitled (island)" (2004) and "Untitled (light)" (2004).

Visitors who know Uta Barth's work will find it surprisingly overshadowed by Johnson's at Bransten. Barth's new pieces, presented in pairs or groups of three with no set hanging order, describe tabletop still lifes of cut flowers. Their icy elegance makes them look like documents of conceptual art bereft of the concept that might have given life to them.

In the late '90s the American and European art public discovered the remarkable portraiture of African photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe.

Bransten adds a third name to that sparse list of reference points: Philip Kwame Apagya. Apagya photographs people in front of backdrops he has painted. The backdrops allow sitters to portray themselves as world travelers, prosperous homeowners, hip denizens of an Internet cafe or visitors to the future. The people in these portraits appear to enjoy themselves with such freedom from irony that they deflect any cynicism we bring to them.

All of us moderns have learned to posture before the camera -- we can hardly refrain from it even in the camera's absence. But it pleases few of us as much as it does Apagya's sitters.

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Blasco at Sweetow: With what he calls "photo-sculptures," New York artist Isidro Blasco takes an impressive first step beyond David Hockney's photo-collages.

Decades ago Hockney began assembling multiple snapshots of the same scene into panoramas. Their faceted, spatial inconsistency evoked the give-and-take of seeing with novel accuracy.

Blasco goes Hockney one better by building delicate wooden structures to support his arrays of connected images.

The three-dimensional strutwork holding the mounted snapshots of "Skylight" (2004) permits us to look up from the top-floor landing of a New York walk-up, down the staircase and into every room of an apartment on a floor below.

This circuitous penetration might merely inflame our anxiety about ever-expanding surveillance. But in evoking the fragility of our privacy and the constraints on vision, Blasco also enlivens our feeling for the fragility, despite appearances, of the built world itself.

The finicky mixed-media sculptures of Los Angeles artist Renee Lotenero suffer from the proximity of Blasco's work.

But the drawings on raw canvas of New Yorker Christian Nguyen hold their own. Describing airless interiors with a graphic architecture of mostly parallel lines, Nguyen's images suggest a minimalist reconception of the carceral grottoes of Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

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Philip Kwame Apagya, Uta Barth, Eirik Johnson: Photographs. Through July 23. Rena Bransten Gallery, 77 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 982-3292, [www.renabranstengallery.com](http://www.renabranstengallery.com).

That which is built: Isidro Blasco: Photo-sculptures; Renee Lotenero: Sculpture; Christian Nguyen: Drawings. Through Aug. 20. Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 788-5126, [www.patriciasweetowgallery.com](http://www.patriciasweetowgallery.com).

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