

Datebook

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Richmond Art Center photos

'The Whale' tries to save us

Righteous etchings out of U.S. history form life-size leviathan in Richmond

By Charles Desmarais

Perhaps it was a coordinated campaign. Or maybe several readers were independently moved to share their experiences. Whatever the reason, I received several emails suggesting I visit the Richmond Art Center to see an exhibition called "Here Is the Sea," and particularly to view a work by the artist Jos Sances titled "Or, The Whale."

One writer called it "phenomenal" and "worthy of your attention." Another said assuredly, "If you see it, I'm sure you will write about it."

Phil Linhares acknowledged at the top of his message that he serves on the board of the art center, but I

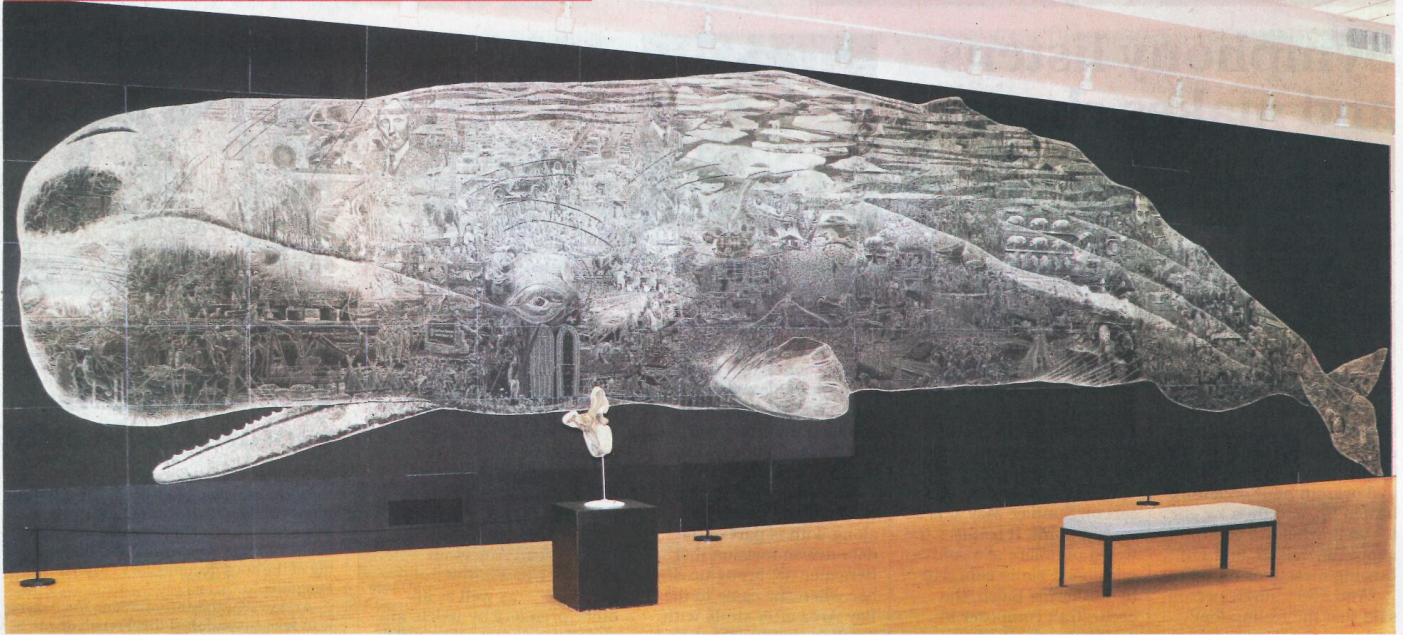
"Whale" continues on E3



"Or, The Whale": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through May 17. Free. A work in the exhibition "Here Is the Sea," at Richmond Art Center, 2540 Barrett Ave., Richmond. 510-620-6772. www.richmondartcenter.org

Above: The head of Jos Sances' "Or, The Whale"; at left, detail includes New York's "Charging Bull" statue.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Richmond Art Center photos

Jos Sances' "Or, The Whale" (2018-19) is on the longest wall of the Richmond Art Center through May 17, with the exhibition "Here Is the Sea."

'Whale' swims in righteous anger

"Whale" from page E1

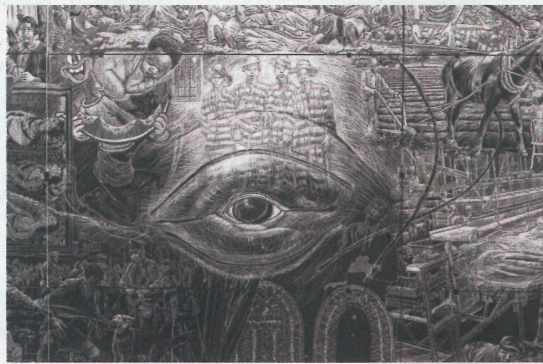
know him as the respected, now retired, former chief curator at the Oakland Museum of California. He knows his stuff.

He adjudged the piece "a real tour de force, an impressive work by any measure, worth a trip to Richmond!"

Who could resist?

I spent only 30 minutes with "Or, The Whale" (more with the rest of the excellent exhibition). It was enough to take in the enormity of Sances' effort, 14 feet high by 51 long, a somber gash across the gallery's longest wall. But it would require considerably more effort to catalog all the images and references contained in 119 panels of highly detailed, white-on-black drawings etched into scratchboard, a specialized sketching material. Assembled together, they form the image of a sperm whale — at life size, we are told.

The creature's eye is bordered with scenes of history's ignoble treatment of Africans and their descendants. Diagrams of how to efficiently fill the hold of a slave ship. Black prisoners in wide-striped uniforms. A black protester attacked by a German shepherd straining on a policeman's leash. Men dangling from a tree on ropes



Detail includes prisoners, and police dogs with protesters.

noosed around their necks.

From that reproving nexus, other stories radiate. Some are reminiscent of Renaissance depictions of Hades. Others are more hopeful. Famous photographs are referenced throughout: the Rev. Martin Luther King, arms locked with other leaders, at the head of a 1965 march in Montgomery, Ala. A teenage girl on one knee, screaming, behind the prone body of a student at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. An Eadweard Muybridge photographic sequence of a pig in motion.

Other scenes are likely invented. A surfer wades through waves of plastic

bottles; a child, surrounded by frolicking sea creatures, offers a sand dollar.

An earlier name for the sperm whale was "cachalot," which, one theory proposes, is from the Iberian word for "big head." The whale as a metaphor for life in the face of the danger of extinction is apt, surely, but it doesn't surprise. Images of protesters, Black Panthers brandishing their arms, tell us stories we know well. The piece, as impressive as it is technically, is all head in its meaning — spelled out, utterly without nuance, closed to alternative interpretation.

For all the attraction of its scale and graphic power, it is



Detail includes civil rights leaders and Black Panthers.

an illustration of an idea, a string of concepts like a PowerPoint slideshow, not a thought set free from the binds of words.

If that sounds like cutting disparagement, know that I love Sances' "Whale." I embrace it for what it is, for its clarity of expression, its righteous anger, its caring concern for the world and its creatures.

The work offers simple solutions to enormously complex economic and social conundrums. How do we eliminate cruelty in the world? Stop being cruel. How can we deal with the threat that our waste will smother us? Give up our wasteful

ways.

That is what the best of illustration does. Where other modes of art trade in doubt, illustration offers surety. It makes the complicated simple or, at least, more comprehensible. It creates a rock to stand on, a place from which to see clearly. Even if that clarity opens a view to a realm contained within the body of a leviathan that is itself endangered.

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