

Artists Community digs deep to fund Root Division's new home

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The San Francisco arts nonprofit Root Division's first-floor gallery space, where the exhibition "Resonate" is on view through September 26, in its new mid-Market home at 1131 Mission Street. Credit: Mido Lee Productions



A visitor to the arts nonprofit Root Division's new mid-Market gallery using a magnifying glass to view artist Kevin B. Chen's pocket-size accordion books of city skylines rendered in graphite, "The View from There." Credit: Mido Lee Productions

"The word 'community' gets thrown around a lot, but we really do provide that for artists," says Mansour. "Of course everyone wants below-market-rate space, but our mission goes so far beyond that. It's part of a larger ethos of wanting artists to be more engaged, more active citizens and build appreciation for the presence of the arts in the city.

The adventurous "Resonate" exhibition (on view through Saturday, Sept. 26) features new work by 17 Bay Area artists and collectives expressing themes of artistic survival and civic engagement in a shifting cultural landscape. Highlights include Kevin B. Chen's delicately rendered miniature accordion books of city skylines, "The View from There;" collective Shipping + Receiving's interactive aluminum geodesic dome stippled with holes re-creating the night sky's constellation of "Stars over Palo Alto February 13, 1956" (a date significant to Silicon Valley tech history); and Kate Stirr's ingenious, tongue-in-cheek "Field Guide to Adaptive Seashore Creatures and Artists of the Bay Area." In a pamphlet accompanying her interactive wood and silicone sculpture "Intertidal," Stirr draws comparisons between real-life local sea animals and the "adaptive traits," "survival skills" and "resource awareness" of that hardy species — the local artist. *Jessica Zack is a Bay Area freelance writer.*

As Root Division Executive Director Michelle Mansour walked through the arts nonprofit's spacious new Mid-Market home on a recent morning, 18 local artists were busy unpacking boxes and hanging work in the just-renovated, white-walled studios they will call their own for the next 12 months. More than a few people getting the first public tours of the 13,400-square-foot, multilevel building and its engaging inaugural exhibition, "Resonate," stopped Mansour to say, "I just can't believe this."

There is an aspect of improbability to the scenario in which a scrappy, though consistently enterprising, community-driven San Francisco arts group lands on its feet in such impressive fashion after an unexpected tumble.

Just 12 months ago, Root Division — which since 2002 has offered artists discounted work space in exchange for teaching art to kids and adults, as well as exhibiting the work of up to 400 artists every year — was displaced from its longtime Mission District home due to a precipitous rent increase.

Mansour, a painter herself who attended the San Francisco Art Institute with Root Division's three founders, says, "Overnight, our long-term goals to build our donor base, and deepen our community impact by acquiring more space, got accelerated. Our five-year plan became our now plan."

During an interim relocation to a Market Street retail space, the impressive former Benefit Cosmetics office at 1131 Mission St. became available, offering the size, natural light and functional multiuse spaces (including a large first-floor gallery, classrooms and substantial outdoor space) the organization had hoped for.

It's a sure sign of Root Division's value to the city's arts community that 50 percent of the group's \$850,000 capital campaign has been raised by artists or people in the local arts community.