



**Above:** Joe Ovelman, *The Bowling Ball*, 2010. Wood, plastic, paper, and acrylic, 11.5 x 8 x 2 in. **Below:** Taraneh Hemami, *Free*, 2011. Neon and mirrored and translucent vinyl on glass, 27 x 54 ft.

on the cross. In Christianity, purple is associated with penitence and mourning; yellow with divinity (or conversely, degradation because it is not pure white). Rather than holes left by nails, Ovelman's orifices suggest not only eyes or sockets, but also sexual acts.

By contrast, the diminutive *Gettin' a Chubbie* makes an explicit link to a sexual act. Equally rich in metaphor, the wall-mounted sculpture features a small block of reclaimed wood attached to a larger one. On the left, a slight, arching protrusion hints at the shape of an erect, uncircumcised penis. On the verso, a blue plastic sheet emanates a heavenly aura of anticipated pleasure, while the worn surfaces allude to years of practice. The surprise,

however, lies at the top, where Ovelman has inserted a piece of gold leather taken from one of his grandmother's shoes. Like Arte Povera and the work of Richard Tuttle, this intimate sculpture charms with its subtle unassuming simplicity.

The scale jumps again in *Two Lovers* and *For Amy*, in which oversized proportions lend an Alice-in-Wonderland quality and draw attention to the works' fantastical purpose. In the former, patches of felt form a tent whose bold colors collide at all angles to create a tapestry with the festive feel of carnival or medieval pageantry. In the mid-section, apertures invite closer scrutiny and allude to a possible ritual: How many people could Ovelman and his lover pleasure if they stood inside? The query remains a fantasy since the housing would collapse under actual use.

*For Amy* deftly brings together the thematic threads of Ovelman's new body of work. An opening in the seat of a stylized potty-chair turns the towering structure into a device whereby an anonymous person crouched inside can pleasure both men and women. The soft white covering is made from his grandmother's undergarments, quilted together with pink hand-stitching and ties. Both surrogate and objectification, the sculpture feels vulnerable despite its imposing presence.

Like Italy's city-states during the Renaissance, each sculpture in "Coming Home" stands its ground, with a distinct character and look, though bonded by an allegiance to the entire body. As Ovelman continues to explore sexual norms and rules of engagement, it's telling that he now does so with works born of pleasure, that organically draw from a variety of art historical references while transcending marginalization and specificity to make gay issues universal concerns.

—Sarah Tanguy

## SAN FRANCISCO Taraneh Hemami

**Yerba Buena Center for the Arts**  
Taraneh Hemami's elegant window installation at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts translated a contentious season of contemporary politics into a dazzling and contemplative work. An enormous radiating star of laser-cut patterning filled the window with the ebullient celebration of the Arab Spring. A neon sign at the center enclosed delicate Arabic script (in yellow) within a ring formed by the repeated English word, "Free" (in blinking blue). Hemami describes this movement as a chant—Free, Free, Free—echoing the message of demonstrators throughout the Middle East. For those who could read it, the Arabic text was legible from the outside looking in; the English text, in reverse, was legible from the inside looking out. The English-speaking world was the implied insider, while the Arab-speaking world remained excluded, outside gazing in.

The window on which *Free* was installed stretches nearly the full length of the center's entrance. The work fronted on Yerba Buena Gardens, a quiet oasis of a park, just steps away from the busy commerce of the city but separated by a change in level and a fortress of

buildings. As visitors crossed the park to approach the entrance, *Free's* star patterns magically transformed into a three-dimensional dome curving up into space, the neon circle taking the place of the dome's central oculus (the all-seeing eye). The use of several different line widths heightened the illusion of depth. The mirrored surface of the primary patterns reflected the garden and sky while blending into the metallic surface of the façade; the double-thick translucent blue line presented a bold graphic to the plaza. Though a Middle Eastern stylistic idiom was instantly recognizable, it was more evocative than literal. At a time when a country based on spiritual freedom hotly debates a proposed mosque at the World Trade Center site, it was reassuring to see the quiet beauty of Hemami's installation stake a claim in the public sphere.

Inside, the patterns flattened into a two-dimensional screen that cast a dizzying display of shadow, light, and color into the lobby. The thinnest mirrored lines became a delicate lace through which to view the gardens beyond. The double blue lines formed larger blocks of color, which traveled across furniture, stairs, and people. The shadows moved as the day passed, as





Above: Taraneh Hemami, *Free*, 2011. Neon and mirrored and translucent vinyl on glass, 27 x 54 ft. Right: Pattie Porter Firestone, *House Askew*, 2011. Painted steel, 12 x 6 x 6 ft. Bottom right: Pattie Porter Firestone, *Seismic Shift*, 2011. Stainless steel, painted steel, and aluminum, 14 x 40 x 1 ft.

though the work's message were seeping out and influencing its surroundings—much like the spirit of freedom that emanated from Cairo's Tahrir Square. The repetitive blinking of the neon from this side was soothing, the text legible and reassuring. The call for freedom is something on which we can all agree.

—Donna Schumacher

**WASHINGTON, DC**  
**Pattie Porter Firestone**  
**Katzen Art Center,**  
**American University**

Filling the Katzen Art Center's "sculpture garden" is no easy task for an artist determined to present a coherent display of work. Intended as a light well to enhance the building, two L-shaped concrete rectangles offer no visual integration unless one stands at their juncture. Pattie Porter Firestone chose to present both wall-hung and freestanding pieces, so her first task was to wed her work with the space in an aesthetically reasonable manner. Turning to a non-visual medium, she invited a musician to collaborate

with her in filling the space with sound. It worked brilliantly. Barbara Buchanan's computer-generated composition pulsated in a wave-like cadence that aurally mimicked the visual elements.

Two-dozen, wave-like twists of blue steel mounted on the walls pulled viewers into the space. While affixed solidly, the forms implied piercing and penetration, a movement in and out of their containment, suggesting waves and water. Two of these blue twists, visible from the outside of the museum, supplied a seductive invitation to come in and see more.

The far wall's mounted structures described the outlines of two houses. The larger one was constructed of angular stainless steel strips, while the smaller form softened the angles into curves. Rendered in strips of equal thickness and width, from a distance, they almost resembled graffiti drawn on the wall. The two shapes were connected to each other with wave-like undulations of additional steel strips and a broken blue steel horizon line. The strips



forming the horizon looked almost as though they had started parallel to each other and were then juddered apart into similar but different contours. One's immediate response was to read into their configuration an echo of the earthquake that had rattled the Washington area little more than a month before.

Further suggesting seismic interference, two freestanding structures, placed well away from the walls, presented child-like outlines of a house and a boat, both severely askew. While puzzling, the distortions did not appear as records of past danger or warnings of future

hazard, but simply as observations of a current condition.

The written word complemented the aural and the visual as a third element in this complex installation. Mounted on the entry wall, Firestone's poem served as an introduction and explanation: "Post-war industry's iron cathedrals are dying...watery waves of resilience waltz me along."

As is often true, the artist's perceptions and those of the viewer didn't always coincide in this show. Clearly the title, "Seismic Dreams," and the visual clues elicited thoughts of a disturbance. While this turmoil could be uniquely personal or broadly cultural,