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ART & EXHIBITS

# New show finds common ground with artists, activists from Oakland and Saint-Denis in France

Jessica Flores | July 15, 2022 Updated: July 15, 2022, 2:08 pm



A portion of the joint U.S.-French exhibition “In the Banlieues/Centering the Margin: Saint-Denis/Oakland.”

Photo: Yann Mambert

Oakland and Saint-Denis in France are alike in many ways. Each metropolis is about a 20-minute drive from a bigger and more well-known city (San Francisco and Paris,



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their neighborhoods. In Oakland, residents await a decision on the A's proposal to build a **\$12 billion waterfront ballpark** and surrounding development that is projected to boost the city's economy, build more housing, create jobs and transform the area near Jack London Square. In Saint-Denis just north of Paris – the poorest department, or region, in France – officials have made similar economic promises as they prepare to host the 2024 Summer Olympics.

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While these huge projects get a lot of attention, a new exhibit opening Aug. 23 at the SPUR Urban Center in San Francisco illustrates how artists and cultural organizations in both metropolises remain at the forefront of expressing and addressing ongoing issues in their communities.

Produced by the nonprofit California Humanities and French institution Villa Albertine San Francisco, the multipart exhibition, "In the Banlieues/Centering the Margin: Saint-Denis/Oakland," is also on view in Paris until Aug. 28.

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The massive collection of images, paintings, artistic installations, videos, archival material and other objects will travel to the Bay Area next month, with openings scheduled in San Francisco and Oakland. Each exhibit will include different artworks, according to June A. Grant, an Oakland-based architect who co-curated the exhibit with Laure Gayet, a French urban planner.

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A textile work from the U.S.-French exhibition.  
Photo: Yann Mambert

The Oakland exhibition is set to open Aug. 25 at Oakstop.

The exhibition is part of an ongoing project begun three years ago by local, state and French institutions that aims to start conversations among artists, urban planners, entrepreneurs and government officials on how to collectively build cities.

Grant said it was important for her to create an exhibition that could examine and influence how cities' planning departments can work alongside artists and community groups to build inclusive spaces. Artists and community leaders know what their neighborhoods need, and each have a long history of advocating for resources despite a lack of funding, she said.

“Planning is typically top-down,” Grant said in a video interview. “But what we’re currently going through is a period of understanding the bottom-up process, that there is validity and value in listening to community groups as we’re plotting our city’s future.”



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together to show the cities' parallels, said Gayet.





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Favianna Rodriguez is an Oakland-based artist and social justice activist. Her work is featured in an exhibition coming to the Bay Area that draws comparisons between Oakland and the French suburb of Saint-Denis.

Photo: Provided by Favianna Rodriguez



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was reportedly the only elementary school in the district without a playground, said Rodriguez.

“I was really honored (to do the mural) because I grew up in this neighborhood,” said Rodriguez, 43, co-founder and president of the Center for Cultural Power, a national organization that supports artists who advocate for social justice. She is known for creating abstract and colorful collages and prints that touch on migration, gender justice, racial equity, climate change and sexual freedom.

“Having neighborhoods with just asphalt is making our neighborhoods hotter, (and) they’re not going to be ready for climate change,” she added.

Rodriguez attended the exhibition’s opening ceremony in Paris last month. She said it was “really moving” to see Oakland recognized internationally. Her main takeaway: “We need to trust community members, and we need to empower people who have traditionally been marginalized.”

She said people also need to trust artists’ ability to create change within their communities. “I have always believed that artists are key to a community’s health,” she said.



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Amir Aziz, a multimedia journalist in Oakland, takes a photograph of Oakland archivist and digital technologist Damien McDuffie (left) with local painter and tour guide Hassan Othman on May 29 following a tour of Stonestown, Zanzibar.

Photo: Provided by Theo Schear

Amir Aziz, a multimedia journalist in Oakland, is also featured in the show. Images taken over the course of his photo career can be found throughout the exhibition in Paris, capturing residents, events and monumental projects in Oakland. Some of his images were captured for the Oaklandside, where Aziz works full time as a visual journalist.

“The work I’ve been doing, knowingly and unknowingly, has always led to ... how (the) community takes control of their destiny,” said Aziz, 29, who was born and raised in East Oakland.

One of Aziz’s images features the West Oakland Mural Project, a 2,000-square-foot mural painted on the exterior of a home by Oakland artist Rachel Wolfe-Goldsmith that honors the women of the Black Panther Party. His other images include the 2020 transformation of downtown Oakland by local artists who painted murals on boarded-up storefronts following weeks of protests after the police killing of George Floyd.

In spite of its relatively small size compared to that of other cities, Aziz said Oakland’s community of artists and activists has global influence. He said he hopes viewers will



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right here (in Oakland) and contribute, however that looks for you and your capacity.

**“In the Banlieues/Centering the Margin: Saint-Denis/Oakland”**: 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Monday, noon-3 p.m. Thursday-Friday. Aug. 23-Nov. 30. Free. SPUR Urban Center Gallery.

654 Mission St., S.F. 415-781-8726. [www.spur.org/exhibitions](http://www.spur.org/exhibitions); and Aug. 25. Specific

times and duration of the exhibit to be announced. Free. Oakstop. 1721 Broadway,

Oakland. 510-698-9370. <https://oakstop.com/portfolio-tag/broadway>



### Jessica Flores

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