

“And San Francisco is now a mutant sanctuary. Any of you—  
and your families or loved ones—are invited to join us here...  
and know safety and protection our kind has never known.”

- *Uncanny X-Men #500*, 2008

In 2008 the X-Men leave their Westchester mansion in New York for San Francisco, and soon after settling in to west coast life, they set up a new secret headquarters in the abandoned military bunkers in the Marin Headlands. With this dramatic move, the superheroes reclaim San Francisco as a place of tolerance and acceptance. Both fans and critics of the comic have identified parallels between activist movements and the non-conforming X-Men, who can still see the utopian potential of the Bay Area, even as they acknowledge that San Francisco “rents are positively astronomical, even for super millionaires like us.”<sup>1</sup>

Like the X-Men, Jerome Reyes understands both the promise and the paradox of the Bay Area. Reyes was born and raised in San Francisco, received his BFA from CCA and his MFA from Stanford, and continues to live and work in the city. His practice is deeply rooted in San Francisco identity and politics, but it also avoids the confines of the local, addressing broader, global issues through the microcosm of a specific site. He recently spent almost four years on an expansive conceptual project centered around the I-Hotel, a historically significant senior housing building in San Francisco.

In 2012 while an artist-in-residence at the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts, Reyes volunteered at the nearby, no longer operative Nike Missile Base, which Rebecca Solnit once referred to as ““a souvenir from the canceled end of the world.”<sup>2</sup> In *Gold Blooded*—a vernacular descriptor for a San Franciscan that references the Gold Rush and Bay Area optimism in general—Reyes expertly weaves together the intrinsic violence of American military power and the fantastical world of the idealistic X-Men within the context of utopian possibilities in the Bay Area.

The gallery walls are painted the same severe institutional grey-green color of the interior of the missile base, and a large circular raised platform sits on the floor. This futuristic sculpture directly channels not only the Headlands missile launching pad and the cerebro, the device the X-Men use to detect mutants discreetly and globally, but also borrows the form of the Star Trek transporter, the quintessential platform for science fiction exploration, and perhaps most provocatively, the central gathering place of the Occupy Oakland movement. The title, *Cerebra (Frank and Oscar text their directions to the search engine)*, suggests this connection to the plaza—officially named after local civil rights leader Frank Ogawa, but called Oscar Grant Plaza by the protesters in honor of a young African-American man killed by the BART police. The multiple layers of this work are emblematic of the complicated state not only of the rapidly changing Bay Area, but also of our current

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Land, Ed Brubaker, Matt Fraction, Terry Dodson, Rachel Dodson, Jay Leisten, *Uncanny X-Men 500* (Marvel, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 7.

moment, characterized by ongoing protests spanning the globe from Tunisia to Oakland to Istanbul.

A roll of 255 feet of opaque white plastic filament—commonly used for flex cuff restraints—hangs on the wall like a minimalist sculpture. However, both the title, *Rappeling for a blind jump into the heart of Chiba City*, and the material indicate Reyes' desire to move beyond art historical allusions into the arena of dystopian visions and contemporary activism. The title suddenly transforms the common substance into a vehicle for illicit movement into Chiba City, the primary setting for William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, while the repurposed material is freighted with its recent appropriation as a tool of oppression in protests around the world.

Nearby a shiny aluminum rod with a wooden handle is displayed on the wall, one end curving into a sinister hook. A multiplicity of references—from the crook used by a shepherd to protect his flock to the vaudeville hook that pulls unsuccessful acts off stage—propels the simple instrument into the complex territory of endless meanings that Reyes thrives on. *For those who can't sink or swim* is modeled after a similar tool at the Headlands Missile Base designed to remove individuals who have been electrocuted from the restricted launch area, but it also resembles a medieval weapon with the potential to cause harm.

A short looped video hung parallel to the ceiling shows the view upwards from the missile launching pad at the Marin Headlands. Sheer blackness quickly becomes blinding white light, as heavy blue doors slide away to reveal the bleached sky. This collapse and expansion of space symbolizes both the potential for radical change but also the danger of its failure, while the grating mechanical soundtrack of the missile base permeates the entire space, adding to the overall sense of anxiety. This quiet tension between protection and aggression throughout and between all the works drives *Gold Blooded*.

“We are living in an age where we are testing everybody's empathy quotient.” Reyes cites this 2011 quotation by José Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize winning American journalist who grew up in the Bay Area and is legally considered an undocumented immigrant, as a driving force behind this exhibition. Empathy is a means of approaching alterity through projecting oneself into the place of the other. In *Gold Blooded*, the specific site of the Headlands becomes the locus through which Reyes identifies with the experience of others in vastly different situations that nevertheless share a certain idealism. Movements like Occupy have shown that the will to radically alter the world for the better endures, and this exhibition offers a possible method of art-making in the context of this resistance.

- Jeanne Gerrity, July 2013