

Datebook



SPAN-TASTIC!
New director, big Golden Gate Bridge
show at California Historical Society

Plus: Brian Copeland, best Oscar-winning songs, Oscar ballot, 'The Voice' winner Javier Colon



Liz Hafalla / The Chronicle

When Anthea Hartig became executive director of the California Historical Society, she had just four months to mount the society's extensive Golden Gate Bridge 75th anniversary show, which she emphasized by painting the society building the same color orange as the bridge.

Director gives new meaning to historical society's role

By Sam Whiting

On her first day as executive director of the California Historical Society, Anthea Hartig inherited a Golden Gate Bridge exhibition that was already behind schedule.

On her desk was a contract obligating CHS to mount a historic overview introducing a region-wide 75th anniversary celebration for the 1.7-mile crossing. There were four months to the opening, and that's all she knew.

Interim Director Mary Morganti hazarded a calming joke. "Well, you know you could always paint the building International Orange."

Hartig, a charismatic ex-UCLA rower who stands 5 feet 11 in heels and moves with long strides, gave Morganti a look to indicate it was too late to take it back. The wheels were turning on a concept that would brilliantly "achieve my goals of bringing the society's collections up and out," says Hartig.

If you go by CHS today, in a repurposed hardware store half a block away from SFMO-MA, you can see how far that little joke went. You'll also see how far the new director plans to take this sclerotic state institution in the direction of "up and out."

The squat, two-story building, heretofore painted blue with white trim and described by Hartig as looking like "a slightly sooty Wedgwood piece that is sitting on your grandmother's shelf," is now painted in the precise shade Morganti

recommended. The bridge district gave 5 gallons, and its supplier, Sherwin-Williams, mixed up another 20 to match the span's tone.

"I want people to say, 'You need to see the show in that orange building,'" says Hartig, "Plus the practical side of me knows that the building needs painting."

A public historian, as opposed to an academic historian, Hartig's specialty is in saving the built environment. "I love the smell of rehabilitation," she says. But she's never before put on an exhibition, has never run an organization of this size and scope, and is not sure what the words "historical society" mean in the 21st century.

She started Oct. 10 and scaffolding has already been up and down. The front desk, which resembled a librarian's

A Wild Flight of the Imagination: The Story of the Golden Gate Bridge runs today through Oct. 14 at the California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., San Francisco. A public celebration takes place from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. today. Suggested donation is \$5. (415) 357-1848; www.californiahistoricalsociety.org.

checkout stand, is gone and the glass box surrounding the museum store is also gone.

In the lobby will be two concierges to guide visitors toward a new gallery to the left where they'll be greeted by Ansel Adams' wall-size black-and-white photomural of the bridge, or to the right where Hartig has reassembled the museum store in partnership with Heyday Books of Berkeley.

"I want people to feel like the bookstore is their own," says Hartig, who is furnishing that area with a kitchen table and a working letterpress. Sit down for a cup of coffee and she might come sit down with you to trade stories about first crossings of the Golden Gate Bridge.

From Pomona Valley

Hers is a good one. She did it in a Ford Maverick from Rent-A-Wreck on a girls' road trip after graduating from Alta Loma High School in Rancho Cucamonga. She grew up in the Pomona Valley where she watched California history unfold as orange groves were plowed under for development outside her grade-school window.

As a reminder of where she came from, she keeps the area code, 909, on her cell phone. But she's suspicious of its designation as the Inland Empire.

"We're still in search of the empress," she says.

Musty old history cranks might grouse that an Angeleno has no business running an organization that has been in



Erik Verduzco / The Chronicle

California Historical Society curator Jessica Hough and staffer Ernest Jolly look over an Ansel Adams photo mural from the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District administration building, part of the society's bridge exhibition.

San Francisco since 1871, but that is just the point. It's not the *Northern* California Historical Society.

Out of all the millions in the Los Angeles Basin, Hartig estimates that maybe 2,000 have ever heard of the California Historical Society, and these are probably the people who have taken Kevin Starr's class at the University of

Southern California. The ratio is better up here. If there are 5 million people in the metropolitan Bay Area, maybe 5,000 or 6,000 have heard of CHS, she guesses.

Buildup to big weekend

The exhibition that will multiply those numbers opens today because Feb. 26, 1933, was the ground-breaking cere-

mony and parade. There will be other art displays, most creatively an installation of 17 site-specific commissions at Fort Point. But "A Wild Flight of the Imagination" is the only one open now for an extended run — three months of build-up to the big event Memorial Day weekend, and five months of afterglow. By the time the Golden Gate Bridge 75th anni-

versary show has run its course, Hartig estimates that 75,000 people, a coincidental number, will have come to see it.

"I told my board when they hired me it is all about decimal points. If we have 3,500 members and there are 35 million people in the state, we just need to keep on moving the

Hartig continues on page 16

The art treasures of the toll plaza

By Sam Whiting

The Golden Gate Bridge Toll Plaza is not generally thought of as a place to stop and study fine art.

So when Anthea Hartig phoned bridge district headquarters to inquire about its collection, she was told, "If you guys are having an exhibit, we have a few things hanging in our office and probably a few more things in our basement."

Underwhelmed by this sales pitch, Hartig drove out to the toll plaza anyway, to take a look at those "few things." Before she'd even reached the administration office she'd passed stairway art by Chesley Bonestell and Maynard Dixon and hallway art by Ansel Adams.

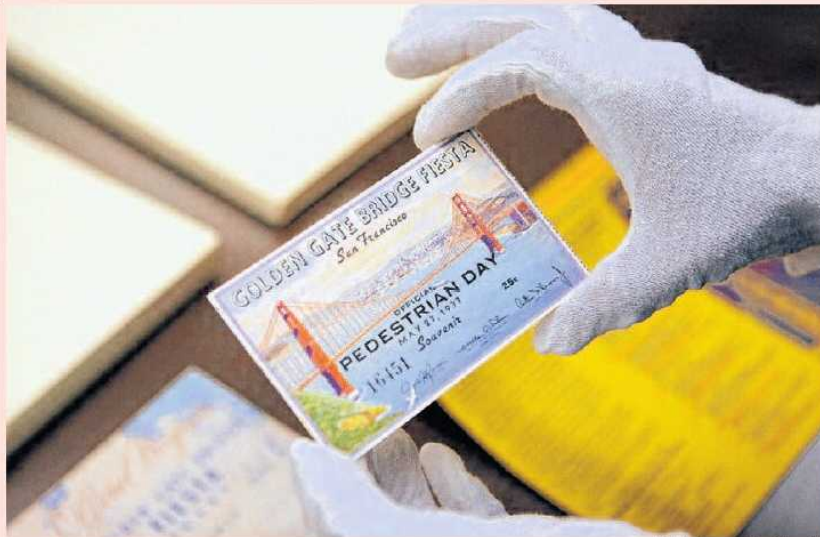
She came away with 12 major pieces — some rolled up in storage, others tucked behind cabinets — all never before seen together in a gallery setting. The bridge loan is central to "A Wild Flight of the Imagination: The Story of the Golden Gate Bridge," which opens today in the CHS galleries on Mission Street.

Emergency curator

The show was put together in four months, which was about a year less than Hartig needed. So her second call went to Jessica Hough to come in as an emergency curator.

Hartig's pitch to Hough was as ho-hum as was the bridge district's pitch about its collection. "She totally undersold it. I was thinking this was going to be a little show," says Hough, who accepted the job before remembering that California history was not her area of interest. "I'm a contemporary curator."

Hough, who is 40 and lives in Los Angeles, arrived on the scene in the fashion of Winston Wolf, the cleanup expert portrayed by Harvey Keitel in



Erik Verduzco / The Chronicle

A ticket for "Pedestrian Day" on the new Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 is among the artifacts in the 75th anniversary exhibition "A Wild Flight of the Imagination."

"Pulp Fiction." Which is to say she solves problems.

All Hough had to do was to put together a show for someone like herself — someone familiar with the bridge, but also familiar with its erroneous assumptions.

"People think it is called the Golden Gate because the bridge is called that, not because it spans the Golden Gate," says Hough, who lived in Oakland for two years while director of the Mills College Art Museum. "They don't realize that the landscape, that aperture, had an important and extensive life before the bridge was built to span it. They also sometimes think the bridge should be gold." Of the 290 items in the show, more than half are borrowed.

Acting on leads provided by volunteer bridge district historians Robert David and Trubee Schock, Hough snooped out all the grandiose architectural de-

sign plans that were rejected, along with those that were realized, in storage at the Environmental Design Archive at UC Berkeley. A scrapbook put together by an ironworker before he fell to his death from the span was uncovered at the Labor Archives & Research Center at San Francisco State University.

No end of ephemera

In addition to paintings and pictures, there are cables and rivets, tool belts and tools, and brochures. Back in the day, San Francisco was a printing center, so there is no end of ephemera hyping the bridge.

At this point, Hough might be the top expert on the Golden Gate, "I got my certification very quickly," she says.

Hartig and Hough make quite a team — one tall, one short, equal in enthusiasm. Equal in thinking big, too.

If a building painted In-

ternational Orange isn't enough, they plan to have vintage cars parked at CHS for today's grand opening. And because they are historians and curators, they are verifying "that the cars actually drove over the bridge on May 23, 1937, the day it opened to vehicle traffic," Hough says.

Today's free public reception will feature a swing band and dancers. Hough and Hartig will be recognizable in 1930s dress. They will be on the lookout for an official sombrero from the Golden Gate Bridge Fiesta which lasted a week in 1937.

That is the one artifact Hough was unable to locate. So if you have an official Fiesta sombrero to loan, bring it. She will make a place for it in the exhibition. ■

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Anthea Hartig, new executive director, California Historical Society

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decimal point," she says. That math appealed to the board, as did the math in not having to pay movers. Hartig was hired away from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, where she was the Western director. Her office was in the Hearst Building on Market Street, so all she had to do was roll her things down Annie alley to the historical society on Mission Street.

Hartig, who turned 48 last week, is married to John Swiecki, community development director for the city of Brisbane. They own a classic California Eichler in San Mateo. Their boys, Langston and Cameron, will go through the California public school system just like their mom did, all the way through her Ph.D. in U.S. history from UC Riverside.

Hartig is on her eighth business card, and "I don't know if I need any more," she says. "Maybe one or two." But she's not going anywhere until she has a good answer to her own question, "What is a historical society?" ■

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