

CRITICISM ► DISPATCHES

Thursday, August 16th, 2018

Made in L.A. 2018: A Provocative, “Woke” Biennial for Los Angeles

by George Melrod

Made in L.A. 2018 at the Hammer Museum

June 3 to September 2, 2018

10899 Wilshire Blvd., between Westwood Blvd. and Glendon Avenue

Los Angeles, hammer.ucla.edu



Selected works by Luchita Hurtado, installation shot, Made in L.A. 2018. Courtesy of UCLA Hammer Museum. Photo: Brian Forrest

Summer in Los Angeles almost inevitably means three things: brutal fires, the Dodgers raising our blood pressure, and – this being an even-numbered year – another iteration of *Made in L.A.*, the Hammer Museum’s buzz-attracting biennial. This year’s, officially the fourth, encompasses 33 artists. Curated by Hammer Senior Curator Anne Ellegood and Erin Christovale, this provocative exhibition is notable for its demographic inclusiveness, with 23 female or non-gender-conforming artists and 21 artists of color. As the curators didn’t nominate a unifying concept, the biennial, spread out across the entire museum, thus seems even more sprawling than usual, leaving the viewer to take each installation on its own terms. Surprises abound. Even so, unlikely dialogues spark. Issues of identity and community weave in and out, along with numerous references to the human body. That confluence of sociological critique and bodily engagement provides the closest thing to a central theme, and gives the exhibition the feeling of a quirky, consciously “woke” travelogue of sorts.

Setting the tone for the show is 97-year old Luchita Hurtado, the latest under-recognized artist to be rediscovered in a “Made in L.A.” biennial, a welcome hallmark of the series. Born in Caracas, and associated with the Dynaton Group in Northern California in the 1940s, Hurtado is represented by a set of compelling, surrealist-inflected paintings from the ‘70s that playfully manipulate perspective, employing parts of her own body – feet, belly, breasts – as elements of landscape. Mysterious, self-affirming, and oddly timeless, the work is a revelation. Although the show is at pains to blur the boundaries of old-fashioned media, two younger painters also memorably twist figuration to their own ends: Christina Quarles, whose looping, semi-abstract protagonists blithely overflow their domestic props, geometric confines, and peeling patterned backdrops; and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, whose figures navigate their own subjective relationship to both narrative painterly traditions and scenes of traditional Americana. *Durham, August 14, 2017, 2017*, her image of an overturned, contorted Confederate monument amidst diverse viewers’ legs, is the show’s most telling take on the current political moment. Diedrick Brackens’ striking textile works look to revive and interweave threads of lesser-known African-American history with unsettling glimpses of narrative, while Aaron Fowler’s playful scrap-filled wall reliefs juxtapose automobile fragments of an El Camino, with mirrors, neons, and piñata-like Minion characters, to reflect his own take on American iconography. Inhabiting an altogether more pensive space, Rosha Yoghmai’s folding screen layered with talismans, glass objects, and light projections, meld allusions to the artist’s own Iranian family background and Southern Californian light and space and assemblage art, to quietly haunting effect.

The show invites, and rewards, ambitious visions: Eamon Ore-Giron’s mesmerizing geometric lobby mural, which draws from such disparate sources as Russian Suprematism, Latin American abstraction, musical scores, textiles, and indigenous mythology, rocked its space, distilling its diverse sources into a dynamic formal machinery. While Charles Long’s giddily nightmarish installation conjured art historical specters such as Guston’s smoking klansmen and Munch’s *The Scream*, conflating tree trunks with phalluses,



Diedrick Brackens, bitter attendance, drown jubilee, 2018. Woven cotton, acrylic yarn, polyester organza, 24 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Steve Turner Gallery, Los Angeles



Selected works by Charles Long, installation shot, Made in L.A. 2018. Courtesy of UCLA Hammer Museum. Photo: Brian Forrest

through a forest of cartoony faces made from giant cross-sections of penises. The image is both goofy and disturbing. A scathing critique of patriarchy's effect on the environment or a dark joke, once experienced you can't unsee it. Formally innovative and often pushing limits, Long is the sort of figure you love to see given free rein in a show like this. He's also currently the subject of his first L.A. solo show in years in the inaugural exhibition of Tanya Bonakdar's new Los Angeles gallery. Yet it is to the curators' credit that more intimate visions also had room to shine. One highlight is the work of Linda Stark, whose formally graphic, densely built up oil paintings conjure personal and feminine topographies, with striking technique and an appealing sincerity. At times her work is startling in its vulnerability, as in her emerald green rendering of a woman's sex and ovaries, with ocean waves for pubic hair, and her witty/loving portraits of cats she has known. *Self Portrait With Ray*, 2017, an example of the latter, shows a tabby gazing back at the viewer from a circle inset like a third eye in a tearful woman's forehead. To anyone who's ever lost a beloved animal friend, or just anyone searching for some actual human feeling in contemporary art, Stark's precise but soulful canvases resonate powerfully. It's nice to be touched and dazzled by work, not just dutifully impressed or pleasantly intrigued. Reveling in its diversity of visions, this "Made in L.A." is an eclectic survey that delivers on all counts.



Linda Stark, Self-Portrait with Ray, 2017. Oil on canvas over panel, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist.