



Art in the Age of Trump

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Made in LA 2018, Biennial Exhibition, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles —

2018, the second year into Donald Trump's presidency, also is the year for the current installment of the **Hammer Museum's sprawling "Made in L.A." Biennial**. As the Trump administration systematically obliterates the groundbreaking accomplishments of several of his predecessors, the exhibition features artists of all mediums who enlist their observations and explorations in the cause for maintaining—or restoring—progressive and critical thinking. Virtually every area of human and non-human activity that has been harmed by the present regime, including, but not exclusive to global politics and trade, climate change, women's rights, racial discrimination, immigration and LGBTQ issues, is on stage as an attempt to answer to the reactionary and hateful forces exacerbated by Trump's America.



Robert Mapplethorpe, Patrice, N.Y.C., 1977

During another era that endured a disastrous presidency, the dominant visual arts in the Nixon years were still in thrall to Modernist precepts of Art for Art's Sake that dictated periodically challenging art's boundaries, definitions and aesthetic norms would, in a kind of trickledown effect, lead to transformation and progress for humankind. It was a rigorous, challenging process described as "The Shock of the New". Disrupting established tastes was crucial to the success of the Modernist project. Such gestures were not well understood by an often hostile public who was called upon to constantly educate itself when confronted with a **Donald Judd** plywood box or a **Robert Morris** felt heap in a corner. Proponents believed that once the viewer was aligned with their novel aesthetic forays he or she and society itself would have temporarily arrived at a better future until the next game changing artistic discovery.

During the Nixon era, a quick check of a 1972 Whitney Biennial would reveal that Formalism reigned in painting and sculpture with

“primary structures”, geometry and grids in full force. In the most ground breaking exhibitions, earthworks filled galleries and documentation described remote sites. Conceptualism provided a check to any bourgeois aesthetic excesses while Warhol’s Pop Factory influenced much image making. Anti-war art and feminist performances and conceptual work were beginning to appear.

Despite the burgeoning of the Feminist art movement in the early 70’s when the visual arts were freed from exclusionist theories and practices and no subject was considered off limits, contemporary art could still significantly challenge middle class values by taking risks with content and form, especially during the Reagan years. In 1981 **Richard Serra’s** monumental sculpture “Tilted Arc” installed in a New York City federal plaza was order removed and sent to scrap because of complaints by office workers. The **Robert Mapplethorpe** NEA controversy in the mid-80’s over funding homoerotic art revealed that art still had the power to outrage and stir heated public debate. Due to increasing social, environmental, and economic pressures and the popularity of critical theory in university art departments and art journals, however, personal aesthetic driven object making seemed less consequential than artworks that engaged with burning contemporary issues. Since 2000, large scale multi-media spectacles and installations as well as painting exhibitions with identifiable social themes have attracted wide attention. A number of exhibitions like MOMA’s “Forever Now” have attempted to revivify individualistic painting and had the effect of providing continuing fodder for art fairs, but many institutions like the Hammer have invested in exhibitions like “Made in L.A.” as agencies of progressive thinking. Like the Modernists who determined aesthetic changes would reverberate through the culture and positively redefine us, the artists here appear to be propelled by their beliefs that their efforts count toward facilitating necessary dialogues and debates surrounding urgent issues. Because it is perhaps easier than real artistic innovation, unlike their formalist forebears, many of the artists tend to document and record their observations rather than radically question the nature of their mediums through manipulating materials. Somewhat more troubling, though, is the sense that they are feeding us what we already know to be true or disturbing. There are no offensive jolts, no provocations to adjust our thinking, no touching on personal insecurities driving viewers to learn. All the boundaries seem to have been previously transgressed with viewers gladly accepting any messiness, awkward amateur paint handling, even stacks of “research” as *de rigueur* for contemporary art. What we experience instead is a satisfaction in having our correct values fed back to us in an entertaining manner. Ironically, like MAGA voters in lockstep with their leaders, all that’s necessary for *Made in LA* viewers is to ascribe to their tribe. No worry that Jesse Helms or Rudolph Giuliani will show up and shut the exhibition down either.



Diedrick Brackens, *bitter attendance, drown jubilee*, 2018



Lauren Halsey, *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project (Prototype Architecture)*, (detail), 2018

With only a few exceptions, most of the artists could be neatly positioned into issue categories. Aesthetic explorations have not been abandoned, but rather put to the service of pumping ideologies by an array of room-sizing eye popping visuals. Several African Americans are notable. **Diedrick Brackens** creates large scale wall tapestries featuring silhouetted figures enacting a real life narrative involving the arrest at a local lake of three young black men who after being handcuffed, drowned from a capsized police boat. Brackens memorializes the event and with potent symbolologies and absorbing black yarns and textures to reaffirm the physicality of the black male body. **Aaron Fowler's** mixed media sculptural assemblages employ a vast array of scavenged materials densely layered to address black culture and identity interwoven with tropes of Americana like the covered wagon and iconic cars. Aesthetically delightful or exotic in their outlandish melange of hair weaves, neon paint, and funky "trash", Fowler's constructions seem to suggest the yearning ever present in the American psyche for the freedom of the road and the possibilities inherent in hybridity and redefining. **Lauren Halsey's** display at the Hammer consists of a small edifice incised with "hieroglyphics" and a range of images from the community. In their references to ancient temple relics, they suggest a reconsideration of ordinary lives, their places and struggles posed within the epic scale of history. Acknowledging the recent upsurges in racist rhetoric and actions, police brutality and violence and the decimation of affirmative action programs, these artworks by Los Angeles African Americans argue back by testifying to the reflective, optimistic and vibrant spirits that pervade their lives.

Similarly, **Celeste Dupuy-Spencer**, **Christina Quarles**, and **Patrick Staff** use various media to address LGBTQ issues. Dupuy-Spencer dedicates a series of paintings and works on paper to the co-founder of Artists Curated Projects which offers space and support for queer and non-male artists. Through references to modern dance, Staff's video analogizes intoxication and the anxiety of pollution with a queer mode of being and questions privilege in celebrating states of disorder. In her floor to ceiling paintings of abstracted figures in patterned floral environments blended with illusionistic stacks of paintings, Quarles engages ideas of self demarcation and body/ gender representation and specificity.



Candice Lin, *La Charada China*, 2018



Rosha Yaghmai, *Slide Samples (Lures, Myths)*, 2018

As Los Angeles is also defined by immigrant communities and its large Latino populations, many of the artworks (eight of the artists are foreign born) addressed those experiences. **Candice Lin's** pink glowing installation *La China Charada* invites participants to walk on and observe earthen surfaces mixed with substances like opium seeds and sugarcane that reference histories of imported Chinese laborers and African slaves on plantations and in industries. By engaging forgotten histories Lin connects viewers to current debates concerning the migration crisis, human trafficking, and labor practices. **Beatriz Cortez's** steam punk kinetic machine *Tzolk'inis* based on the Mayan 260 day agricultural calendar and links to a larger version installed across town. Having immigrated from El Salvador, Cortez examines how divergent entities, histories, countries and humans can co-exist. Working from her Iranian immigrant father's family slides, **Rosha Yaghmai's** luminous and magical sculpture is created by projecting her father's imagery through a paneled screen made of cast resin sections and personal artifacts. Mesmerizing and exotic, they simultaneously evoke the faraway and present to perhaps embody an immigrant's complex feelings and experiences. Another stunning work is **Carolina Caycedo's** *Cosmotarrayas*, a series of hanging artisanal fishing net sculptures filled with objects like weathered bottles she acquires from communities affected by government and corporate dams. Swinging freely from the high ceiling, the sculptures promote reflection on the free flow of water for sustenance and imply metaphors of resistance against the ability of people to flow through barriers. Likewise, **Suné Woods** rapturous video installation projects footage of clothed swimmers underwater at a California's Desert Hot Springs, also a site for Native American spiritual ceremonies. Like Caycedo, Woods connects viewers to human relationships and dependencies based on water. The dreamlike clothed swimmers also seemed to reference recent migrations across the Mediterranean.

Environmental concerns about ocean endangerment came into play with images of water projected onto used tarps to reference disaster relief and industrial sites. **Daniel Martinez's** photo installation of sites along the border between East and West Berlin where the Berlin Wall once stood contain images of the artists holding a portrait of Ulrike Marie Meinhof, the German left wing militant who was arrested and found dead in her prison cell. Meinhof's legacy is reexamined in light of Trump's calls for the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and is a potent reminder of the current threats to democracy and what constitutes a correct response.



Luchita Hurtado, Untitled, 1970



Suné Woods, Still form Falling to Get Here, 2017

Perhaps as an indication of how much women have gained in the last few decades, several artists explore gender stereotypes with humor and wit rather than directly attacking patriarchal power as cultural warriors previously did. **Linda Stark's** *Rainbow Pierce* depicts two erect female nipples like two eyes staring down the viewer in a defiant act of ownership of female erotics and ecstasy. Likewise the exquisitely painted palm of the artist's hand in *Stigmata* is emblazoned with the word "Feminist", conjuring many metaphors for how the label is acquired and revealed. Not as compelling as Stark but memorable for its inclusion are 98 year old **Luchita Hurtado's** paintings of of her own body symbolized as fruits and landscapes. Long ignored as a woman painter, Hurtado blends a kind of Magrittean surrealism with interests in human interconnections with nature and affirmations of female power. A largescale installation by **Jade Gordon and Megan Whitmarsh** consisting of videos, soft sculptures of consumer products, and pamphlets parody female empowerment movements and advertisements. Though entertaining, it does little to create "a space for dialogue and thoughtful participation" as the wall text announces.



Linda Stark, Rainbow Pierce, 1995



Charles Long, Paradigm Lost, 2018

Environmental politics are likewise humorously treated in **Charles Long's** large sculptures of segments of felled trees made to resemble cross sections of a penis, as if to take revenge for environmental damage by neutering male aggression and power symbolized by the phallus. A series of totemic knock offs by iconic male artists are displayed in this environment next to an enormous mask-like face made of clay suggest a post apocalypse and a return to more primitive situations. Also looking toward a future of a different sort, **Michael Queensland's** wall of hi-tech glass encased cereals divorced from their bright packaging consider the nature of agriculture and consumption and the specter of space colonization after the earth is no longer habitable. **Neha Choksi's** multi-channel video installation examines humans' relationship to our sun using images of a dancer tearing away layers of wallpaper depicting sunsets. It's a powerful evocation of temporality and transience as we process the threat of climate change.



James Benning, *Still from Found Fragments (scorched earth, Ash 01, RED CLOUD)*, 2016

The darkness of the military industrial complex is underscored in both **James Benning's** multimedia installation and **Gelare Khoshgozaran's films**. Benning's *Found Fragments*, a three channel video projection, display footage of scorched earth due to a massive Sierra fire, radio transmissions from a Vietnam era B-52 bomber, and a sun rising and setting over a framed drawing of a native American man. Together they make a powerful statement about the connections of human and natural annihilation. Khoshgozaran's footage of events from the Iran Iraq war shown in a gallery hung with oil drum hardware, examines representations of the Middle East and the continuing violence in the region, conceivably the results of Western misperceptions and fictions.



John Houck, *Accumulator #10, 3 Colors*

In a singular category, **John Houck's** *trompe l'oeil*-photographed layered collages of small personal paintings and creased and folded colored papers investigate the nature of the photographic medium itself rather than using the medium as Martinez does to proffer ideas of social justice. Houck's "destruction" of the pristine initial prints by the creasing then becomes simply an illusion in the re-photographing process, providing sustained fascination and meditations on fact and fiction. In the company of so many artworks that depend on captivating viewers with their topical ideas and lesser interests in opticality, Houck stands out as one artist whose commitment to examining visual perception remains a valid pursuit in a time of national ADHD.

Made in L.A., 2018 certainly confirms many of our current ecological and social anxieties and capitalizes on our indignities without taking any real aesthetic or content risks. Part of the complicated nature of contemporary art and its embeddedness with the art market is that once an artwork is validated by a

museum exhibition it immediately finds its way to the living rooms of wealthy collectors and the investment vaults of museums where its worth exponentially increases, leaving many questions about the true intentions and influences of such work. (There have been recent shows such as Into Action in Los Angeles in which artists subverted the investment potential of their artworks to function purely as activism). Because there is no estrangement of the viewer as Modernism dictated with the artworks playing to our sympathies/empathies very effectively, it's difficult to accept any of this work cynically or even critically. On the most positive level, the exhibition as a whole exuberantly bears witness to the complex multi-faceted and richly textured nature of the present. If that's the only thing Made in L.A. accomplishes it remains an important part of a cultural counter narrative to Trump's political theater that has revealed the worst of who we are as a nation and reduced the human experience to Manichean struggles. Although the art in this exhibition doesn't require anything close to the intellectual gymnastics required of Formalism and is instead steeped in entertainment values, in thinking about its possibilities to incite societal change, we might ponder 17th century poet Thomas Traherne's words, "You never enjoy the world aright 'till you so love the beauty of enjoying it that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it."