

ART & DESIGN

Meet Six Disrupters at the New Museum's Triennial

By HILARIE M. SHEETS FEB. 2, 2018

When Gary Carrion-Murayari showed up in 2015 at Bikini Wax, a funky living-cum-exhibition space for emerging artists in Mexico City, everyone there put out the call to friends: “There’s a curator from the New Museum interested in meeting some young artists — do you want to come down?”

Over the course of the day, about 10 artists, including Manuel Solano, streamed through the gallery with portfolios and laptops to show to Mr. Carrion-Murayari, who, with Alex Gartenfeld, had just been tapped as the curators of the 2018 New Museum triennial and were beginning a worldwide hunt for the next generation of important voices. Mr. Solano, a transgender artist who was denied access to medical care in Mexico while in the early stages of H.I.V. and went blind from the infection, offered painted self-portraits — and was among the first of 26 artists or collectives from 17 countries selected for “Songs for Sabotage,” opening on Feb. 13 in New York.

When the New Museum kicked off its first triennial in 2009, titled “Younger Than Jesus,” some critics raised their eyebrows at the ageist premise. Yet the focus on international youth has come to distinguish these triennials from a slew of rival shows. And the current news cycle makes this a potentially more interesting moment to consider the new generation’s sensibility. The fourth version includes artists ages 25 to 38 whose work often pushes back against social or bureaucratic power structures and sounds the call for change.

The personal risks can be high. Song Ta, from Guangzhou, in southern China,

makes videos that undermine the government's authority and have been banned from exhibitions. Anupam Roy has displayed his paintings as banners at student protests in New Delhi. For those working in Athens or Mexico City, with hardly any commercial galleries to support them, a different kind of "resourcefulness, collaboration and commitment to be an artist" is required, Mr. Carrion-Murayari said.

This triennial "isn't about making art stars," said Lisa Phillips, the director of the New Museum, "but looking at whether there are similarities and affinities across cultures among an emerging generation of artists." Of course, in years past some stars have risen: Danh Vo, for example, whose survey at the Guggenheim Museum opens on Feb. 9, and Adrián Villar Rojas, who transformed the Cantor Roof Garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last year, both gained from exposure in the 2012 triennial, "The Ungovernables."

"When all of us are feeling the fire of youth, young people's voices have really come to the fore, particularly in the last year," said Tom Eccles, the executive director at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, who is not affiliated with the New Museum. The challenge of the triennial, compared with surveys like the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale, where most of the participants are already known, is to find "artists we ultimately can believe in," he said.

That will be determined by time. Mr. Carrion-Murayari, 37, and Mr. Gartenfeld, 31, the deputy director and chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, made nearly two dozen trips around the world, to places where artist communities weren't digitally accessible. "We really made a focus of looking at artist-run and alternative spaces as ways of questioning how global art markets have been growing," Mr. Gartenfeld said.

A shared mind-set that emerged among the chosen — many showing in the United States for the first time — is "the recognition that what we're experiencing today is the continuation of colonialism that has never truly ended," Mr. Carrion-Murayari said. Artists like Daniela Ortiz from Peru and Cian Dayrit from the Philippines speak in very similar ways about "ethnic and racist divisions that were put in place" during the colonial period, the curator said, and they are responding with subversive gestures.

Ms. Ortiz has proposed replacements for monuments to Christopher Columbus in Madrid; Lima, Peru; and New York, including a ceramic sculpture of a refugee wearing a shirt that says, “The migratory control system is the continuation of colonialism.” In Mr. Song’s comical video installation called “Who Is the Loveliest Guy?” the artist persuaded Chinese naval officers to ride a high-speed roller coaster, then videotaped their efforts to stay stern and composed — although ultimately their authority and restraint broke down.

“That’s sabotage, and that’s also song,” Mr. Gartenfeld said. Here is a preview of six of the triennial’s activist-artists.

Haroon Gunn-Salie

AGE 28

BORN Cape Town

LIVES/WORKS Between Johannesburg and Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Working with dispossessed communities in South Africa and Brazil, Mr. Gunn-Salie makes immersive multimedia installations that give form to the residents’ oral histories. For the triennial, he consulted with the widows and survivors of the 2012 Marikana massacre in South Africa to create a sculpture and sound installation memorializing the 34 miners killed by police as the workers were attempting to peacefully disperse after a weeklong strike.

Mr. Gunn-Salie used police footage of the crouching protesters at the moment right before the police opened fire to recreate the event with life-size figures, headless and spectral, made of workers’ clothing stiffened and sculpted with mixed media. “It’s almost like a graveyard,” said Mr. Gunn-Salie, who also included the sounds of blasting from the mine as a link to the landscape. After New York, he said he planned to take the work home to be shown as a way of “further engaging what is going on with our country and our leaders,” and pointed out that one of the managing directors of the mine is now highly placed in the South African government. The artwork, he added, raises “a question of complicity.”

Claudia Martínez Garay

AGE 34

BORN Ayacucho, Peru

LIVES/WORKS Amsterdam

Born during the civil war in Peru between Shining Path's communist insurgents and the government, Ms. Martínez Garay deconstructs visual imagery in propaganda as a way of understanding worldwide labor and social movements. For the triennial, she scoured the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam for posters and leaflets across the political spectrum, focusing on repetitive imagery of fighting warriors and animals. She is interested in how the same types of images have been used by right and left ideologies to manipulate the viewer. She reproduced the figures as painted wood cutouts and juxtaposed them attacking each other in a mural-size work called "Cannon Fodder." "It's like watching a cock fight," she said.

Wilmer Wilson IV

AGE 28

BORN Richmond, Va.

LIVES/WORKS Philadelphia

In his mixed-media work and live performances, Mr. Wilson investigates "the way that blackness is represented in the city space," he said — specifically the treatment of black bodies as objects of labor or desire, and the ever-present threat of violence. "I'm interested in producing a different possibility of representation" for African-Americans, the artist said, "one that's divergent from a pervading global advertising style."

For the New Museum, he gathered fliers and posters for church plays, strip clubs and concerts that he found stapled to scaffolding and telephone poles or stuck to windshields in his neighborhood in West Philadelphia. Mr. Wilson enlarged the photographic portraits to life-size and affixed them to plywood panels using thousands of reflective staples that screen part of the portraits, revealing just

hands, feet, mouths and ears. The subjects are protected, Mr. Wilson said — even as the artist is locking them in.

Shen Xin

AGE 27

BORN Chengdu, China

LIVES/WORKS London and Amsterdam

Ms. Shen makes poetic film and video installations that explore how the authority of science and spirituality can be eroded by real-life experiences. Our personal identities, emotions and relationships are constantly testing our belief systems, she said. In “Provocation of the Nightingale” (2017-18), one screen features YouTube videos of people discussing how the results of their AncestryDNA genetic tests shattered, or affirmed, their self-images. The facing screen shows an intimate and wide-ranging conversation between two actors playing female lovers talking about religious assimilation, the ethics of DNA testing, abuses of power and rape. “Shen is driven to ask these questions because of a personal desire to understand herself,” Mr. Carrion-Murayari said. But the universal nature of the issues she explores “makes them very relevant within a global context.”

Hardeep Pandhal

AGE 32

BORN Birmingham, England

LIVES/WORKS Glasgow

A second-generation British Sikh, Mr. Pandhal often uses animation to satirize racist and cultural stereotypes of his community in Britain. For the triennial, his psychedelic and humorous music video “Pool Party Pilot Episode” features imprisoned sperm cells with turbans and beards. Delivered in rap and rhyme, the artist’s narration splices together text from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel “Herland,” about a society of women who reproduce asexually, and Elaine

Morgan's theory — not widely accepted — that we evolved from early ape ancestors who lived in the water. "Part of the work pokes at what constitutes race," Mr. Pandhal said. "There's also a sort of ridiculing of male power." He is curious how the work will be understood outside Britain. "In America, there's a well-documented confusion people have about Sikh men and Muslims," he said.

Janiva Ellis

AGE 30

BORN Oakland, Calif.

LIVES/WORKS Los Angeles

Ms. Ellis grew up in Hawaii where she described feeling like "the only black person." Now she makes paintings that communicate the isolation and pain of the African-American female experience. Each of her three allegorical canvases in the triennial is set in a pastoral outdoor environment, to contrast with "the internal mayhem" her subjects feel, Ms. Ellis said. In "Curb-Check Regular, Black Chick" (2017), the "battlefield" is a farmers' market. A dark-skinned woman selecting produce appears to have internal organs erupting from her chest. Three white women recede in the distance. "You're in this pleasant situation, picking up a cabbage, but there's still a fraught dialogue that happens, whether it be a memory or something a stranger says" that can feel psychologically eviscerating, Ms. Ellis said. The paintings are "not only an attempt to communicate to nonblack women my experience, but also to call to other black women, 'Do you feel this, too?'"

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