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New Museum Triennial Looks Great, but Plays It Safe

By HOLLAND COTTER FEB. 22, 2018

The New Museum's fourth triennial exhibition, "Songs for Sabotage," is the smallest, tightest edition of the show so far. Immaculately installed, it's also the best looking. Less admirably, it's the safest. There's a lot of good work, real discoveries. But in a politically demanding time, the show keeps its voice low, acts as if ambiguity and discretion were automatically virtues. In an era when the market rules, the show puts most of its money on the kind of work — easily displayable things — that art fairs suck up.

With a roster of just over two dozen artists — the 2015 triennial had 51 — from 19 countries the show fills three floors (with a spillover to the lobby) and makes judicious use of the museum's cramped, high-rise, narrow-gauge spaces. Most artists are represented by more than one work, a smart move. And much of the work was commissioned for the occasion, which may explain some rough edges and a lingering scent of fresh paint in the air.

And painting is plentiful. Where the last triennial situated itself in the digital present and future, this one is emphatically analog: oil painting, ceramics and weaving are among the preferred media. With just a handful of videos, a few installations, no live performance, and nothing interactive — not a keyboard in sight — the show has a pre-internet, objects-only 1980s vibe, an interesting throwback, considering that all the artists, as well as curators (Gary Carrion-Murayari and Francesca Altamura of New Museum, and Alex Gartenfeld, founding deputy director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami) are in their 20s or 30s.

As if to justify the reference to sabotage in the title, there are examples of activist, or activist-minded art. Anupam Roy from New Delhi, a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, papers a room with Expressionist drawings assailing the reactionary climate in his country today. Haroon Gunn-Salie of Cape Town, South Africa, memorializes the 2012 police massacre of striking miners in his homeland with a group of life-size black resin figures and a soundtrack of gunfire and anti-apartheid songs. And Daniela Ortiz, who is based in Barcelona, brings a selection of tabletop-size ceramic prototypes for anti-colonialist monuments, including a beheaded alternative to a Christopher Columbus statue in New York City.

Over all, though, the show settles for evoking a mood of political unrest rather than proposing change. The centerpiece of the sparsely, beautifully arranged fourth-floor space is a three-minute video by Manolis D. Lemos, a Greek artist born in 1989, titled “Dusk and dawn look just the same (riot tourism).” In it we see, from behind, a group of 24 people, their faces hidden by hoods, lined up as if about to march in an empty downtown Athens street. They’re facing Omonia Square, the site of frequent anti-government demonstrations during a decade of forced economic austerity. As the video opens, the group sprints toward the square.

But who are these “rioters”? The video is scored with an old, leftist pro-democracy song, but the “dawn” in the title could refer to Golden Dawn, a right-wing Greek nationalist party. And whatever they’re protesting, how firm is their commitment to it? As they run, they break formation, move farther and farther apart, weaving back and forth in crisscross patterns. Then as they approach the square, they disperse in individual directions and out of the frame, like a corps de ballet disappearing into the wings. Their political gesture seems to have been little more than a choreographic exercise, charming to watch, but tactically slight.

At the same time, the performance’s primary features — physical fragmentation, elusive meaning — are the strengths of other works on the fourth floor. The young American artist Wilmer Wilson IV enlarges photographic images of figures, most of them African-American, that he finds on fliers for parties and church events in his West Philadelphia neighborhood. He attaches the images to tall wood boards with industrial staples — not just a few but hundreds of thousands staples, so that the photograph is almost entirely covered, leaving just small sections — an isolated

bottle, or mouth — clear.

From a distance, the effect is gorgeous: an Impressionism of gleaming steel. Up close, though, you zero in on the individual staples and get a sense of the material violation they cause. Whether you see the figures — the bodies — underneath, and whether you consider them to have been assaulted or exalted by their metal overlay, will depend on how close to them, in every sense, you stand.

Large oil-on-canvas paintings by Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude, who lives and works in Harare, Zimbabwe, also lead a double perceptual life. On first view, each is a crazy quilt of lush, fruity colors and abstract shapes. Gradually recognizable forms emerge: patches of military camouflage, detached limbs, headless mouths, grinning or gaping. A wall text — opaquely written, like most in the show — tells us that work is an extended commentary on the political corruption and repression that for decades sent fissures of fear through the country under the rule of the recently deposed president, Robert Mugabe. (What may be a portrait of Mr. Mugabe appears in one of the paintings here.)

There are many ways for art to address such subjects, some far more forthrightly indicting than what we see here. But Mr. Nyuade's satirical approach, mingling hilarity and horror, suits the show's preference for polemical indirection, just as his semiabstract style, which foregrounds color and texture, sustains a prevailing focus on traditional studio formal skills. Indeed, if seen only in passing, these paintings might not register as political art at all.

The same can be said of three suspended metal sculptures by the Norwegian artist Tiril Hasselknippe. On initial encounter, they seem to be boxy, uninventive riffs on old-style Minimalist abstraction. Then you note that Ms. Hasselknippe, in her titles, calls them "balconies." And this identity, within the "sabotage" theme, generates narrative possibilities. You can now see the sculptures as architectural fragments left hanging — miraculously, freakishly — in midair after buildings they were once part of had been blown away.

It's a tribute to the show's curators that all the utterly unlike art installed on the fourth floor — including a cast metal sculpture of a child's swing set, as grim as a gallows, by the Brooklyn-based Diamond Stingily — not only comfortably coexist, but work together, with pieces amplifying each other, like props on a stage, to

create a larger, atmospheric drama. The installations on the show's other floors don't achieve quite the same unitary effect, though there are some shrewd pairings throughout.

On the third floor, Cian Dayrit's tapestry-like mappings, part fact, part fiction, of Philippine colonial history suggest a regal but ideologically loaded setting for Mr. Gunn-Salie's monument to martyred workers. On the second floor, work by two young Americans — vivacious paintings incorporating religious and racial stereotypes by the Los Angeles artist Janiva Ellis, and 3-D printed African sculptures looking as sleek as car parts by Matthew Angelo Harrison of Detroit — complement each other without looking the least alike.

As to videos, they do fine on their own. One, by the Chinese artist Song Ta, is short and funny. Somehow, in an amusement park in Guangzhou, he persuaded a troop of starchy, stony-faced Chinese marines to take a roller-coaster ride — one with a terrifying vertical drop — and filmed them as they shrieked. They got to loosen up for an afternoon; we get to smile at Mr. Song's soft punch to manly power.

Also likely to be an audience favorite, and for good reason, is an animation, by the Hong Kong artist Wong Ping. This is one of the few pieces with obvious digital roots and with politics that feel as much existential as circumstantial. In three ingenious back-to-back fables, one featuring a Buddhist elephant, another a social-media-addicted chicken, and third an insect-phobic tree, Mr. Wong sabotages logic itself.

And I wonder if any logic system could explain the particular weirdness of the animation called "Pool Party, Pilot Episode" by Hardeep Pandhal, a second-generation British Sikh living in Glasgow. Basically a manic rap cartoon video, it weaves religion, politics and sex together in an aggressive linguist tangle. The results feel old and new, like 1980s multiculturalism sliced, diced and tossed with acid, or identity politics dragging on past its sell-by date. The rapper-artist lines up a slew of once meaningful and validating self-identities — Sikh, male, middle-class, British, Asian, former colonial subject, artist — only to shoot them all down, execution-style.

Speaking of executions, the philosopher George Bataille once referred to

museums as guillotines, meaning institutional devices that swiftly, cleanly cut art off from life by removing it from its political and psychological sources. I don't know how far you can take the analogy, but for an exhibition that's engaged in its social and political moment, as the New Museum triennials avowedly are, "Songs for Sabotage," despite some powerful work, feels oddly removed from the field.

In a disturbed and perturbing time, one that calls out for some — any — form of revolt, the show hunkers down, cautions wait-and-see. In place of actions — I think of the Queens Museum's idea of positioning itself as a culture resource for immigrant populations — it privileges objects: paintings, sculptures and videos; some of those in the show are doubtless already poised to ride the conveyor belt to the market. Again, this triennial has many virtues. What's missing is the will to stretch — sabotage — art, and the politics of it, in new and needed ways.

A version of this review appears in print on February 23, 2018, on Page C26 of the New York edition with the headline: Paint's Fresh, but the Songs Remain the Same.