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ART REVIEWS

Brooklyn's Strivers and Those a Museum Spurned

Two surveys of hometown artists — one at the Brooklyn Museum, another of those it snubbed — serve as a meditation on recognition and rejection.

By Max Lakin

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The 1863 edition of the Salon de Paris, the conservative, government-sanctioned biennial, would have been largely forgotten were it not for the protests. That year, the Salon jury turned away more than half of the hopeful, most of them practitioners of the new, loosely brushed technique soon to be dismissively referred to as Impressionism. Their discontentment reached Napoleon III, an expert populist, who ordered a simultaneous exhibition: le Salon des Refusés — literally, "The Exhibition of the Rejected" — among whom were Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro and Édouard Manet, whose "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" scandalized (but didn't sell). It's considered the first major breach of modernism.

That punk, avenging spirit animates the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition's "Salon des Refusés 2024," an exhibition of work spurned by the Brooklyn Museum's recently opened "Brooklyn Artists Exhibition," at least in name. Whether the next Manet can be found in the Coalition's sprawling Red Hook warehouse is unlikely; there is no radical pictorial advancement or rupture of accepted taste here. But counterprogramming is always useful, and taken together, the two shows, deeply uneven in their own distinct ways, reveal a small piece of the city's usually unseen stock of strivers.

Pegged to its bicentennial, the Brooklyn Museum earlier this year issued an open call to artists living in or maintaining a studio in the borough to submit proposals. Some 4,000 responded — no doubt a daunting task for the jury of artists (Vik Muniz, Mickalene Thomas, Fred Tomaselli and Jeffrey Gibson, all museum trustees) — to wade through, especially as one third of the show was already filled by artists invited by either the selection committee or the museum.

In its entirety, "The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition" — 227 objects by 215 artists spread across 20,000 square feet in the museum — is itself a kind of second prize, made up of work that is not included in the museum's more consequential rehang of its American collection. As curatorial conceits go, "pays taxes in Brooklyn" is not airtight. The show is about many things — community engagement, inclusivity, good will, warm feelings, accidents of real estate — but an aesthetic argument is not one of them. It is a disjointed, formless dip into very recent

contemporary art that varies widely in discipline and makes no attempt to say anything that hasn't been said elsewhere. There is beauty to be found, but there's also whiplash.

The museum exhibition doesn't delineate between the invited and open call artists, perhaps trying to project a level playing field, but it's not hard to pick out the familiar names already buoyed by institutional muscle: Qualeasha Wood and Narcissister, the photographer An-My Lê and the sculptor Guadalupe Maravilla, both in the collection of MoMA, William Villalongo and Nina Katchadourian. It's as if the museum didn't trust itself, or the borough's reserve of artists, to supply a fully realized survey.

That's a shame, because some of the most affecting work here is by artists who have rarely, if ever, exhibited before: Michelle Im's palm-size ceramic portrait of assimilation and split consciousness; Josh Sucher's bijou memory cocoon recreation of his father's Brooklyn Heights law office; Bobby Silverman's tactual, mesmeric glazed porcelain.

A bursting oil and fabric relief from Halley Zien is simpatico next to the inimitable Nancy Grossman's "Untitled (Red Fez)," (1967-2016), elegantly fusing metal machine parts and leather. The museum show suggests there's an encouraging return of young artists to abstraction — Akiko Yamamoto's cascading collage of rice paper, magazine tear-outs and silver lead is a standout — though figurative imagery maintains a vice grip on the imagination.

There are gloopy ceramics and post-ironic surrealist photography and well-trod ideas about identity politics and too many puppet videos. Not everything is worth lingering over. But in its sweep of human experience, it brings to mind the sign that, under the tenure of Marty Markowitz, Brooklyn's former Borough President and its last great marketer, welcomed drivers crossing the Williamsburg Bridge with the overzealous promise, "Name it ... We Got it!"

The subtext that Brooklyn constitutes a uniquely pluralistic society makes sense until you remember Queens exists. Mostly the show makes conspicuous something that Brooklyn Museum at large seems unnecessarily intent on escaping. Its insistence that great artists live in Brooklyn isn't a proposition that anyone disputes, but by belaboring the specialness of its geography, it makes a case more for its insecurity than supremacy.

If "The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition" has the mannered eclecticism of a senior thesis show, "Refusés" has the feral persistence of a hungry animal. It mirrors the Brooklyn Museum's in size, if not sophistication, but ends up being conceptually stronger because its artists are at least allied in exclusion. Much of the work here was rejected for good reason: either too raw, or too blunt (an entire section is devoted to paintings of icebergs), or too much like something pulled out of an attic for an estate sale. There are plenty of wholesome watercolors of borough views, including multiple Whitmanesque Brooklyn Bridge pastorals. There are also gems, chief among them Luis "Inca" Ramos's nimble, mesmerizingly detailed diorama of the Manhattan Bridge, circa 1980. More than one employee of the Brooklyn Museum is represented in the show.

The Salon's wall labels are concise, listing just the artist's name and the work's title along with a price, something you won't find at any major gallery in Manhattan but serves here as a reminder that you're looking at an attempt to build a viable career. Rejection stings, but it's also a dull truth of creative life. The show turns over disappointment's sour flavor in the mouth before swallowing it and getting back to work. (The exhibition poster, embodying that attitude in a fat, raspberry thumbs-down, may be its most effective piece).

Resilience surfaces in George Horner's "I Gave You a Retrospective at the City Dump!" (2020), a Tracey Emin-style neon text sculpture that repurposes a bon mot the artist's brother offered after Horner threw away his archive — a fermented glass of lemonade wrung from a lifetime of lemons. And it's there in the title of Marie Gagnon's soft abstract still life "And We Begin Again" (2024).

The criteria here is deliberately democratic: an artist need only have produced a rejection letter from the Brooklyn Museum. This is the art show as solidarity, a second part for another 200 artists is planned for later this year. It's a reminder of Manet's assertion that "to exhibit is to find friends and allies for the struggle." Whether much of this work does or doesn't belong in a museum ends up being irrelevant. There's bravery in hearing you're not good enough, and to keep going anyway.