

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Made in L.A. 2014
The Hammer Museum
Through Sept. 7

Los Angeles: Michael Ned Holte is a young Los Angeles curator and critic in the new mold of both professions. His criticism has consisted largely of explanatory texts—as opposed to outright reviews—on current artists of the edgier variety, and his curatorial efforts have been mostly of group shows for commercial galleries. Until now, he'd never organized a museum exhibition. But in 2012 he wrote a review for Artforum of the Hammer Museum's first "Made in L.A." biennial exhibition, in which the following phrases appeared: "collective SoCal navel-gazing," "boosterish tone," "a stage for the underrecognized," "what, exactly, made this exhibition 'LA' beyond the mailing addresses of its artists," and "whether the city really needs such a determinedly local biennial." Of course, Mr. Holte nominally cushioned his barbs by saying he was talking of "a first glance," merely citing the title of the show and posing questions.

His review accomplished two things. It hurt a lot of local feelings, because Los Angeles's art world—though it claims with some justification to have moved on from a second-city resentment of New York and even to have surpassed it as the national headquarters of noteworthy contemporary art—doesn't like to be looked down upon by a powerful art magazine headquartered in sooty old Gotham (even if the naysayer is a faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts). And it caused a gauntlet to be thrown his way: Hammer Museum director Ann Philbin (who moved to Los Angeles from New York's The Drawing Center in 1999) said, in effect, "OK, Buster, you curate the next one." So he has, in tandem with Connie Butler, the museum's resident chief curator.

This year's edition of "Made in L.A." is less sprawling: Instead of three separate locations spread across the city as in 2012, "Made in L.A. 2014" sticks mostly to the museum's Westwood premises. It does, however, fill every Hammer gallery, and spills over into a few outdoor areas. The show is smaller, comprising 35 artists (some of which are, as per the fashion, "collectives" involving several people) instead of the 60 artists two years ago. Perhaps predictably, the exhibition is young (youth culture and Los Angeles are practically synonymous) with less than half the participants having had solo exhibitions in Los Angeles since the first biennial, and many having received their masters of fine arts degrees in the current century.

Los Angeles is still a metropolis of newcomers; in addition to the U.S. cities that have always sent ambitious people here, the birthplaces of some of the artists in the biennial include Guadalajara, Nairobi, Naples and Tehran. It's difficult for an artist to gather a sense of community in the automobile-dependent expanse of the great Los Angeles basin. Perhaps that's why there are groups such as the ad hoc radio station KCHUNG, a roving curatorial outfit called Public Fiction, and the either cleverly or guilelessly labeled "Los Angeles Art Museum"—a little exhibition space in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Eagle Rock—included in the show. Essentially, they shoehorn into the exhibition artists who weren't individually selected. This time, women constitute a majority of the artists in the show.

Plagens, Peter. "Exhibit a Creation of Show, Not Tell," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 August 2014.

Art exhibitions aren't sociological surveys, however. What counts—or should count—most are not numbers, percentages or artists' résumés but the work on view. In that respect, "Made in L.A. 2014" negotiates a tricky path between subversive and slick, between what's expected in pulse-taking surveys of contemporary art (which happens to be slick pseudo-subversiveness) and genuine cries from the heart that are at least a little bit different from those of the recent past.

Take abstraction. Nobody, it seems, can make abstract art these days without either disowning its being about form, shape, color, scale, the materials in themselves, etc., or gussying it up with fillips of theory. Caitlin Lonagan (b.1982), a painter of that almost colorless, left-out-in-the-rain kind of visually safe work you see so much of in the galleries these days, is said by the exhibition catalog to display an "alienation from abstract expressionism" that comes from a demurral of "allegiance with any formal school or position." The very loosely knitted "paintoids" (yes, I'm trying to coin a term here) of Channing Hansen (b.1972) are, on the other hand, visually risky—webs of yarn adhered to wooden strainers can be quite homely. But—again according to the catalog—their purpose is to "subtly reveal the biases of accepted canons."

The real meat of "Made in L.A. 2014," though, lies in those two frequently combined topics currently so popular in the art world: sex and identity. Max Maslansky (b.1976) pussyfoots around outright pornography by painting (on old bedsheets, no less) images from the production stills of X-rated movies in a blurry, decorative watercolor technique. A.L. Steiner (b.1967), in the identity-art category, is a social reformer who describes herself as a "skeptical queer eco-feminist androgyne." Her contribution to the biennial is a lesbian man-cave—that is, a few gallery walls functioning as a sort of den, minus the pool table and bags of Cheetos—festooned with propaganda ("God Hates Banks" is a funny riff on the Westboro Baptist Church's homophobia) and raw versions of family photographs. It's militantly antiaesthetic, but an island of Mississippi-Delta-blues-quality authenticity in a sea of comparative glitz.

It terms of politics, nobody in the show comes close to the scattergun intensity of Jennifer Moon (b.1973). After doing prison time for an attempted robbery (committed, she says, during a drug "downfall"), she started making art in the service of a movement called "Revolution" (no points here for originality), which would change the world through "love, presence of mind, and empowerment" (no points, either, for precision). Understandably, Ms. Moon's work in the exhibition is morphologically all over the place: photography (including a color remake of that famous image of Huey Newton in the wicker chair, with Ms. Moon sitting in for Mr. Newton); video; memorabilia; free pamphlets; and a complex diagram, with blocks of text in a tiny font, of romantic relationships complicated by politics. Ms. Moon has been granted a surfeit of Hammer floorspace for a remarkably clean, Crate & Barrel-like exegesis of "revolutionary" politics.

Speaking of retail shopping, the competition for the most psychedelic reincarnation of a Bloomingdale's cosmetics counter may not be that tough here, but "Thank You" by Samara Golden (b.1973) says much about the overall character and purpose of the show. Ms. Golden has attached to dolls the photographic heads (in that off-register 3-D technique requiring special glasses) of allegedly everyone she met during her first half-year in Los Angeles. "Thank You" also features plenty of chartreuse and mirrors. One local critic has called it the exhibition's "trippiest installation."

Some people see general signs of American social malaise in "Made in L.A. 2014." Others, mostly in the general public, think that even 35 artists are too many for this show to make sense. Putting aside the perennial questions of geographic eligibility, and individual quality versus documenting the temper of the times, to me this biennial represents the temporary triumph of display over theory. Surface, shine and personality mean more in "Made in L.A. 2014" than does esoteric intellectualism. That's a relatively good thing in an art exhibition. Perhaps this positive grace note will save this reviewer from an invitation to curate the next biennial.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.