



The Carnegie International Puts Joy before Politics

Oct 18, 2018

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Alex Da Corte, *Rubber Pencil Devil*, 2018, 57th Carnegie International.
Photo by Tom Little. Courtesy of the artist and Karma New York.

It may not be a household name, but the Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the second-oldest exhibition of contemporary art in the world, after the Venice Biennale. Initiated in 1896, the event aimed, in the words of Carnegie Museum of Art (CMoA) founder Andrew Carnegie, to “bring the world” to Pittsburgh—a city whose art-world bonafides are perhaps slim, beyond being the birthplace of Andy Warhol. The show is flexible, taking place every three to five years, depending on how much time each curator wants to research and commission new work. The 2018 edition (the 57th) attracted an international group of contributing artists including Alex Da Corte, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Kerry James Marshall, who milled about the galleries this past weekend.

I asked Marshall if he was looking forward to doing anything else in the city while he was there. “The Carnegie *is* the thing,” he said, when I caught him near his contribution to the show: newly conceived, black-and-white comic strips printed on plexiglass, hung in one 70-foot-long line throughout the lobby of the CMoA. Offering disjointed narratives that revolve around a superhero called Rythm Mastr, they provide a conceptual, Afrocentric alternative to, say, *Superman*. Some strips are meant to be read right to left; text appears backwards when issued from the mouth of a character facing away from the viewer. The strategy suggests that these works aren’t necessarily for *you*, but for another, fictional audience. Marshall first exhibited comics at the institution’s 1999–2000 Carnegie International exhibition. “There was a necessity for comic representation of black figures,” he told me, because you didn’t see them in daily newspapers. Nearly 20 years later, he was back to debut his latest installment.

Cohen, Alina. "The Carnegie International Puts Joy before Politics," *Artsy*, 18 October 2018.

Marshall's work is but one part of a large, yet concise exhibition. Organized by curator and Pittsburgh native Ingrid Schaffner, the show includes work from over 30 artists, situated inside the museum and along its grounds. This reviewer, used to being herded around via bus or on foot to see biennial-style exhibitions spread across entire cities, was quite content to spend the entire day at one institution. I could focus on the art instead of my blisters, body temperature, and next meal. To be fair, the guidebook that accompanies the exhibition in lieu of detailed wall text warns visitors that "art galleries are maintained at a chill 68 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit with 45 to 55 percent humidity....A sweater is advised." Schaffner's attention to detail and emphasis on visitors' enjoyment can make her seem like a benevolent babysitter, or just make other curators look like sadists.

In fact, the Carnegie International provides a decidedly comfortable experience overall. Given the apocalyptic tenor of today's news (Migrant mothers are still separated from their children! The Supreme Court is bust! Global warming will kill us all by 2040!), the show is surprisingly lighthearted. Schaffner organized an exhibition more focused on inspiring pleasure than on addressing any particular crisis; "Museum joy!" proclaims the accompanying tote bags. (If you want simple and immediate moral outrage while visiting the show, you could always check your phone notifications.)

Throughout, Schaffner embraced the decorative. After mounting a set of stairs off the lobby, flanked by a bright and blocky Sol LeWitt wall drawing (part of the permanent collection), viewers enter a gallery with boldly patterned rugs (featuring depictions of high-heeled shoes) by Ulrike Müller and "paintings" (some comprised of painted tiles, others of dyed, stitched canvases) by Sarah Crouner. The works create a stylish, colorful portal into the rest of the exhibition. Across from the LeWitt, they offer an early example of Schaffner's attempt to connect the new Carnegie International works and commissions with the museum's architecture, permanent collections, and installations. (The most significant link between old and new, perhaps, is El Anatsui's massive intervention: aluminum panels that coat the CMOA's façade.)

From this chic gallery, visitors enter a room filled with Yiadom-Boakye's suite of imagined portraits. Fantasy and fashion prevail again. The artist paints fictional (predominantly black) figures, often at large scale. One picture, *A Whistle in a Wish* (2018)—of a woman in a black dress with a blue collar, smoking a cigarette propped between long, elegant fingers—radiates an effortless cool. Nearby, *Coronet* (2018) depicts three men lounging together above a black-and-white checkered floor. Sporting vivid hues—a purple shirt, a green scarf—the men strike casual, languid poses.

Clothing reappears with a more politicized slant in Beverly Semmes's *Feminist Responsibility Project*, for which the artist alters pages from pornographic publications and digitally prints them onto dresses, pants, and tops. Ultimately, Semmes appropriates objectifying images for her own aesthetic (and commercial) ends. The Carnegie International hangs a video from one of her fashion shows, featuring these designs, on a wall decorated with chartreuse tulle.