

Hirsch, Liz. "The Search Continues: Witch Hunt at the Hammer Museum and Institute of Contemporary Art," *ArtNews*, 3 February 2022.

The Search Continues: "Witch Hunt" at the Hammer Museum and Institute of Contemporary Art



Candice Breitz, *TLD*, 2017, thirteen-channel video installation, color, sound. Conceived in dialogue with SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce), Cape Town. COURTESY THE ARTIST; GOODMAN GALLERY, JOHANNESBURG AND LONDON; KAUFMANN REPETTO, MILAN AND NEW YORK; AND KOW, BERLIN.

A witch hunt is a public persecution of an individual or group; the term implies a crime hazily described with a slim chance of defense. Silvia Federici explored the witch hunt's historical significance as the persecution of women perceived as powerful or deviant during the emergence of capitalism, but in recent years, prominent men have increasingly taken up the label to casually deflect negative attention. Using the witch hunt as a framework for a two-venue exhibition at the Hammer Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, curators Connie Butler, Anne Ellegood, and Nika Chilewich implied that there is something witchy about the women artists represented here, that they may bring to light certain truths that could trigger mobs. The works included in "Witch Hunt" make space for a more plural consideration of global, contemporary strains of feminist discourse. Many are feminist in a capacious sense, thoughtfully inclusive of race, gender, and class analysis, and offering layered social narratives.

The Hammer segment of the exhibition opened with thirty-two air conditioners, mounted in a grid and filled with water from the Rio Grande, blowing cool air into the museum's lobby and grand stairwell. This chilled air of Teresa Margolles's *El agua del Río Bravo* (2021) evoked the cold operations of another kind of circulation: attempted migrations and frequent deportations along the United States-Mexico border, which the Rio Grande demarcates. For another of her works, *El sueño americano* (2021), Margolles conducted candid interviews with women and transgender refugees in the Respetttrans shelter in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Their testimony played in Spanish, without translation, from a line of wall-mounted speakers. One person comments on the mutable nature of gender identity: "Yo siento que he vivido como cinco vidas en una, porque fui niño, fui niña, fui niño, fui niña,

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y ahora ya definitivamente soy niño" ("I feel that I have lived like five lives in one, because I was a boy, I was a girl, I was a boy, I was a girl, and now I am without a doubt a boy"). Photographic portraits of some interviewees hung in an upstairs gallery, alongside a selection of their colorful wigs, evidence of the subjects' self-styling. The work uplifts the voices of traditionally marginalized people, particularly by featuring its subjects' testimonial recordings and other forms of self-representation. Audre Lorde and others have critiqued feminist discourse for historically centering white, straight, middle- and upper-class women; Margolles instead highlights those who fit none of those criteria. Her work grounded the exhibition's focus on the transnational conditions and concerns of women.

Okwui Okpokwasili's *Poor People's TV Room Solo* (2014/2021) takes inspiration from the 1929 uprising of Nigerian women against British colonial power to offer another example of feminist struggles beyond the traditional narratives often presented in the US. A video was projected on plastic sheeting stretched around a tall wooden armature that, in previous installations, doubled as the artist's stage for a live dance performance. A torso-shaped sculpture made of raffia, a plant fiber native to Africa, slowly spun inside the armature when the artist was not present, adding visual and aural texture as it brushed against the tarp. Against a farther wall, projected footage showed Nigerian women dancing and congregating. The accompanying soundtrack incorporated protest chants inspired by generations of resistance in Nigeria.

Some works clung to a more narrowly defined strain of feminism. For her sardonic video *Two Minutes to Midnight* (2021), Yael Bartana gathered a panel of women—the leaders of an imagined nation, with some actual military and governmental experts—in a Dr. Strangelove-inspired military war room to discuss the threat of nuclear annihilation and possible disarmament. Bartana depicts the kind of feminism where women "lean in" to positions of authority, yet still operate under existing patriarchal, nationalistic power dynamics. "War is not a man's game," argues one participant, but in the end the president of this fictional nation-state is shown with a group of young people throwing their machine guns into a pit. Bartana seems to assert that women, if given the power, would pursue peace through a rejection of military aggression. The film feels like wishful thinking.

Attitudes toward sex also vary widely among the participating artists. Candice Breitz's video installation *TLDR* (2017) shows how sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa, who are members of the organization SWEAT (Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce), are advocating for the decriminalization of sex work. One young speaker named Xanny Stevens stands amid a group of individuals carrying protest signs bearing slogans such as not your object and not your victim. Stevens speaks about the debate surrounding decriminalization and how it squares with the strain of liberal feminism that refuses to acknowledge the dignity and autonomy of sex workers. In a separate room, a ten-channel video component of the same work features many hours of interviews with the workers. One of the women, her name given as Nosipho "Provocative" Vidima, says: "My sexual liberalism pulled me out of poverty. Straight out. And I'm fine with it. I'm OK with embracing the fact that I'm a sexual being." Breitz's is a more empathetic feminism than that of Beverly Semmes, whose *Feminist Responsibility Project* (2002-) features enlarged images of vintage pornography that have been effectively censored; her female subjects are rendered pitiful, shamed beneath the artist's casual overpainting of their bodies.

Organized on the heels of the Trump administration, which particularly undermined women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ communities, the exhibition is at once a welcome rejoinder to a deeply retrograde moment in political history and a canonically expansive entrance into recent feminist art history, conflicting strains included.