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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The Old Guard meets a new crop in “Greater New York.”

By Andrea K. Scott, NOVEMBER 2, 2015 ISSUE

Fifteen years ago, the Museum of Modern Art merged with P.S.1, an alternative art space in Long Island City housed in an old public school. To mark the occasion—and to give the Whitney Biennial some competition—the newly minted moma P.S.1 launched the quinquennial exhibition “Greater New York,” a bellwether of the local and new. In 2005, the opening of its second edition coincided with a big art fair, prompting one critic to write that the survey had “no way of separating itself from the market’s engorged desire for some institutional guidance among the sea of young artists now plying their wares.”

That critic was Peter Eleey, who has since become the associate director of the museum and the co-curator of the fourth “Greater New York,” which is far more than a youthquake. Name a social issue, the show takes it on. (There’s even a self-reflexive salon des refusés: “lesser new york,” a project by the Swedish-born Fia Backström, which was rejected by the show’s organizers in 2005.) While many of the hundred and fifty-eight artists are in their twenties and thirties, the show also includes pieces that were made as long ago as the nineteen-seventies. The transgenerational trend extends to the co-curators, the attuned up-and-comers Thomas J. Lax, of moma, and Mia Locks, of moma P.S.1, and the éminence grise Douglas Crimp, an art historian best known for his generation-defining essay “Pictures” (also a show), which is now almost forty years old.

The result is a deeply thoughtful if muted affair, with one selfie-baiting exception: an installation of twenty-four figurative sculptures on the second floor. They range from John Ahearn’s loving, life-size rendition, in painted cast fibreglass, of a South Bronx mother and daughter, made in 1987, to a statue encrusted in beads—a giddy hybrid of Umberto Boccioni and Bootsy Collins—completed last year by the Mexican-born, Brooklyn-based Raúl de Nieves. **Standing sentinel is “Kali Bobbit,” a slapstick warrior-goddess in the form of a mannequin wearing thigh-high stockings and a belt full of knives, made in 1994 by the feminist pioneer Mary Beth Edelson. (Note to Eleey: Give this octogenarian phenom a one-woman show.)**

L.G.B.T. issues are prominent, seen through scrimps of both nostalgia (Alvin Baltrop’s candid photographs of gay men cruising on the West Side piers in the post-Stonewall seventies) and rage (the aids activism of the collective Fierce Pussy). This year, Charles Atlas trained his video camera on the drag legend the Lady Bunny for nineteen riveting minutes as she championed the disenfranchised in an impassioned rant that could give Bernie Sanders a run for his money, before bursting into lip-synched song.

We shouldn’t need hash tags to remind us that black lives matter. It’s a self-evident truth, signalled at the outset of the show by David Hammons’s red-green-and-black “African-American Flag” (1991/2015), which flies in the courtyard. That spirit of visibility recurs throughout, in works by emerging talents (Kevin Beasley, Deana Lawson) and in a text piece by Glenn Ligon, an artist so established that his work hangs in the White House. Ligon chronicles every apartment he’s had in New York, from the public housing project in the Bronx where he grew up to a condo on the edge of Tribeca; in the same room, the soundtrack of an installation by Sergei Tcherepnin pounds away like a sonorous jackhammer. Ligon concludes, “The idea of living anywhere else has never occurred to me. Indeed, to live in New York is to have lived everywhere.” In its sprawl—sometimes confused, often stirring—it’s an everywhere that “Greater New York” tries to reflect.