

ARTNEWS

PS1'S SPRAWLING 'GREATER NEW YORK' SHOW BROADENS ITS PURVIEW, WITH MIXED RESULTS

BY Andrew Russeth POSTED 10/09/15 8:40 PM



David Hammons's *Untitled (African American Flag)* (1991/2015) flying above MoMA PS1's courtyard for 'Greater New York,' which runs through March 17, 2016.

PHOTOS: ARTNEWS, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

What a sight! David Hammons's glorious black-and-red-striped African American Flag is now flying high in the sky above the courtyard of MoMA PS1. Visible even from outside the Brutalist concrete walls of the Long Island City museum, it is the first work that visitors will see in this year's edition of "Greater New York," and it is emblematic of the intriguing changes that are afoot in this, the fourth edition of the quinquennial.

Once a proving ground for young artists—you can count on one hand the number of artists older than 50 who appeared in past editions—the exhibition has gone boldly multigenerational for 2015. The average age of the 150 or so artists is almost 50, and a not-insignificant percentage of pieces date from well before the 2000s. You may recognize some of them, like that flag, which Hammons, who is 72, first showed in 1991 and which has hung for years outside the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Nostalgia—for the grittier New York of old, for certain established artists, perhaps for less complicated times—wafts through the show, but thankfully, it rarely overwhelms. In some of the show's best moments, the older works and older artists imbue the affair with a measure of historical gravitas, raising the bar and providing a foundation for the younger artists on hand.

One prime example: unflinching, sexy black-and-white photographs by the late, great Alvin Baltrop (1948–2004) that document the cruising scene on the long-lost Hudson River piers in the 1970s and 1980s links up in scary, intoxicating ways with the similarly marginal, post-apocalyptic world that Loretta Fahrenholz presents in her

masterpiece of an abstract sci-fi zombie dance film, *Ditch Plains* (2013), in which dancers roam through East New York and Far Rockaway in the dead of night post-Hurricane Sandy.

The work was previously been screened at Fahrenholz's New York gallery and as part of the 2014 White Columns Annual. Which is to say that if you have been dutifully going to some of the city's better emerging galleries over the past two or three years, many of the younger artists here will be familiar. Some of the works will be too, having been recycled from previous exhibitions. For working critics, that is a disappointment. There are no grand surprises, no major discoveries to be made.

The show's curatorial foursome—MoMA PS1 curator Peter Eleey, art historian Douglas Crimp, MoMA associate curator Thomas J. Lax, and PS1 assistant curator Mia Locks—have placed work in a way that is spacious and considered, and many of the artists they have tapped are excellent, but their final result is oddly anodyne. Many of these artists have taken bigger swings elsewhere in recent years, and many are represented by only a single, modest work. I suspect a lot of people will walk away from the show with pleasant impressions, a few nice photos, and none of the lasting shocks that can come from thrillingly new art.

Having said that, if the goal of "Greater New York" is to provide for the layperson an overview of what the youth and some of their more esteemed elders are up to, then this edition is reasonably successful. It presents a multifarious art scene that is hot for painting (at least of the studiedly naïve, digitally pristine, or scatological varieties), taken with outré-minded fashion designers, returning to the readymade in oblique ways, and occasionally a bit too enamored of the past.

It is not just Baltrop's sex photos calling up the precarious New York of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. James Nares's *Pendulum* (1978) is screening in PS1's cavernous duplex gallery, a film of a prop wrecking ball swinging along an empty TriBeCa street. A long row of photos from 1976 by Roy Colmer cop Ed Ruscha's *Sunset Strip* trick, showing every door along various stretches of Manhattan streets. Another suite of photographs, from 1979 by Henry Flynt (the composer!), shows the snappy graffiti poetry of SAMO, the nom de plume of Shannon Dawson, Al Diaz, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, scribbled on the sides of buildings. Images by Rosalind Fox Solomon, who is 85 this year, show all kinds of New Yorkers out and about in the city, including two young black boys eyeing guns at a police museum as two white mannequins loom over them eerily. The feminist art collective *fierce pussy* also provides a marker of enduring trauma. Founded in 1991 to combat AIDS, it has wall installation and takeaway newspaper print that memorializes the countless unnamed victims of the disease.

These works throw into sharp relief the fact that few young artists (in "Greater New York" or otherwise) work in such a strictly documentary or on-the-streets mode today, with the excellent photographer Deana Lawson as one of the exceptions. The show includes a long, moving row of images snapped over a number of years by corrections officials at a prison in upstate New York of the same family's visits—the mother and father (who was incarcerated) always appear, but the young children come and go.

Real-world politics intrude explicitly at only a few other times, and not always successfully. Cameron Rowland (whose solo outing at Artists Space was recently sadly delayed) offers up two makeshift pass-thrus (the revolving doors used to guard products and employees from customers at bodegas) and a box of copper piping. His lengthy statement on a wall label about welfare reform is a tad self-indulgent for my taste, but the fact that collectors can only rent, never own, that box of copper feels like the start of an interesting idea. Angie Keefer opts for more-overwrought conceptual gestures in the room next door—the price of a photo of spray-painted houses in Hudson, New York, is tied to the value of that real-estate and a video of a waterfall is timed to the predictions of commodity futures.

But such examples of intellectual pretension are mercifully rare. This is a show about visual pleasures, albeit of a largely restrained, domesticated kind. In the big open gallery on the second floor, the curators offer up what is, relatively speaking, their one big virtuoso presentation, assembling a large gang of figurative sculptures. The quality is uneven and the works bleed together a bit at a distance, but it is the one time that your pulse might quicken.

On the more-established end of things in that room, there's a rough-hewn bronze Huma Bhabha, strong as ever, and two nude Tony Matelli people, one male, one female, both naked, standing on their heads. Lesser-known young artists performing well include Sam Anderson, a fast-rising miniaturist, who offers a bewitching clay sculpture, a life-size little girl sitting on the ledge of her hollowed-out pedestal, and Hayley Silverman, who has funny, oddly

grotesque noodle bowls filled with various little figures. But I think Raul de Nieves steals the scene with a positively effervescent, bulbous cartoon character of a body covered in what must be tens of thousands of little shiny balls in every color. And under-sung veterans look good too. Mary Beth Edelson's Kali Bobbit (1994) mannequin wields butcher knives in her many hands. John Ahearn presents a characteristically touching double portrait. Red Grooms's bronze Mr. Universe (1990) is unrepentant beefcake kitsch.

Mr. Universe's fulsome muscles rhyme very nicely with the bulging biceps and pecs in one of the six delicious paintings offered up by Gina Beavers, whose heavily textured works portray, with almost sickening amounts of paint, food porn (juicy steaks, a bounty of donuts), and porn porn (a body bedecked with bath soap). Mouths will water.

Yes, painting is fairly well represented, and much of it is strong, from the hyper-real pop oddities of Greg Parma Smith to the flowing ladies of Mira Dancy (who has a joyous wall painting on the top floor) to roughly 35-to-40-year-old paintings by Robert Kushner to the fabric constructions of Eric Mack.

But the curators seem so fixated on keeping the proceedings neat and tidy and spare that they almost manage to deaden the power of some other paintings, which is something of a feat given the huge talents involved. In a room with black walls they packed in four extroverted, appropriation-filled cartoon paintings by Jamian Juliano-Villani and only one each from William Villalongo, Sue Williams, and Peter Saul. Those unfamiliar with their work may be left wondering what the big deal is about them, which is a shame.

Also in that black room, though, is the young gun Ajay Kurian, whose sculptural confections are like nothing else out there: a black monolith glows with a deep orange planet (the checklist list notes that Gummy Bears are involved), and two wall pieces resemble alien worlds populated with, in one case, e-cigarette towers and swirling fog.

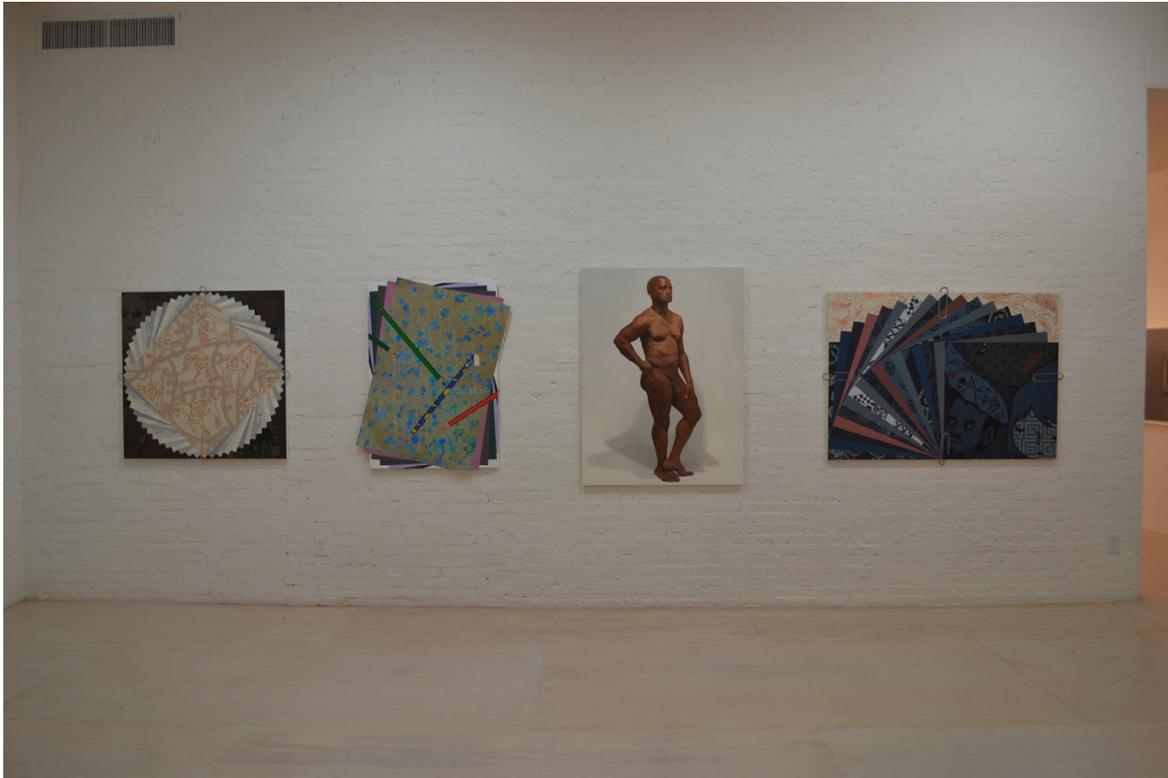
With varying degrees of success, "Greater New York" also ventures beyond art into visual culture as a whole. The fashion designers offer some visual punch, particularly the vet Susan Cianciolo, whose do-it-yourself elegance just had a star turn at New York's Bridget Donahue gallery. Elsewhere, the bracingly cool Eckhaus Latta presents, with Annabeth Marks, painted clothing pieces on plastic models in a delectable full-room installation. (Bjarne Melgaard makes a guest appearance as a model!) The New York shop Kiosk also gets a whole room to themselves to show quite a few of the thousands of sundry objects they have sourced and stocked from all over the world. I would quibble with this decidedly non-art (and gleefully consumerist) inclusion if the overload were not such a delight to behold, and if that overload did not link up so nicely with the hand-fashioned objects of artist Nancy Shaver, a shopkeeper herself, and photographs by Sara Cwynar, which share the room and overflow with visual information.

Those designers and artists all get fairly sizable amounts of real estate, as do welcome inclusions like the ingenious furniture of Scott Burton and the ceramic wonders of Joyce Robins. But using nearly a whole room for the bland resin sculptures of Amy Brener and generic architectural scans by Nick Relph feels borderline criminal when so many great artists are frustratingly represented by only one or two works, as is the case with Howardena Pindell (whose shimmering paintings need a major retrospective in New York), Park McArthur, Sergei Tcherepnin, and Kevin Beasley.

Like the last iteration of "Greater New York," in 2010, this one, which runs through March 7, 2016, sports a formidable lineup of screenings and performances, many of which look promising, and some of which will provide much-needed jolts of antic energy.

For many, New York is not an easy place to live right now. It is certainly not an easy place to be making art. Walking through the show, I kept hoping to come upon more signs of the tense, tenuous state of the city in 2015, displays of biting dissonance. They never appeared. On the one hand, I admire the sunny disposition of so much here; on the other, I admit that it feels off. And so the work that I kept coming back to, the one that feels like it most precisely represents the present moment, is Fahrenheit's film *Ditch Plains*. It is set in a world that is at once in disarray, unreal, wracked by the threat of violence, and endlessly seductive. All the while, mysterious bands of artists are trawling through the wreckage, conjuring something new.

Update, October 12: An earlier version of this post misstated where Angie Keefer's photograph was shot. It depicts Hudson, not Detroit. In addition, Keefer's video is timed to commodity futures, not stock futures as previously stated.



Works by Greg Parma Smith