

Ebola Gets the Modern Art Treatment: The New Museum's Very Political Triennial

The work of 50 artists at the New Museum show 'Surround Audience' focuses on the hot-button issues of race, the environment, and fear of disease.

by Justin Jones 2.25.15

I was somewhere on the Atlantic coast of Brazil, standing in the Mata Atlântica rainforest. Massive trees stretched endlessly above my head as I stepped over vines, crushed fallen leaves, and dodged the occasional bush. Everything seemed lifelike, except I couldn't grasp what I wanted to touch. In fact, I couldn't see my arms. I couldn't find my feet.

Yet, there was no way I was dreaming. Five minutes earlier I had been standing on the second floor of the New Museum in New York City, touring their latest exhibition and third triennial, *Surround Audience*. The show is a consistently eye-opening barometer of the practices and trends of modern art.

This edition of the markedly international show, co-curated by art world darlings Lauren Cornell—the former director of Rhizome, an internet-focused art organization—and Ryan Trecartin—a video and performance artist whose admired works seem to come from a futuristic planet—explores the ways in which, according to Cornell, “technology and late capitalism have been absorbed into our bodies and altered our vision of the world.”

My alternate reality had come from Brazilian artist Daniel Steegman Mangrané. His piece, titled “Phantom,” allows viewers to interact with the rapidly disappearing environment, which houses some of the world's most important species, through a version of the Oculus Rift virtual-reality headset.

Over 50 other artists' viewpoints are also put on display—through mixed media, video installations, sculptures, and performance—riffing on the current social and economical climate we currently live in and foreshadowing a future that's all too close for comfort.

The most obvious of these is Josh Kline's “Freedom” installation. Five Teletubby-like figures in heavy combat gear litter the room as President Obama addresses the nation on a screen behind them.

The actor, who's had the president's face digitally imposed on his, speaks of “peddlers of hate whose stock-in-trade is xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and isolationism, and who define America by our differences rather than our common bonds.”

It's a rallying cry for social justice and equality, as smaller screens on each of the police figures recount major current events such as NSA surveillance, Ferguson, Occupy Wall Street, and ISIS.

Current events are given an even more eerie depiction with Chinese artist Nadim Abbas's *Chamber 664*, *665* and *666*. The three bunker structures, which mimic an aseptic isolator cell for quarantining people, depict the possible realities of living in a world threatened by biological warfare and mass-spreading diseases such as Ebola.

Two sets of rubber gloves allow for physical contact between those quarantined and those not. The beds are disheveled as personal belongings litter the shelves and hide under the sheets. The void of a living human tells of a very dark future.

The show's artists are extremely politically engaged. It seems as though almost everyone presenting their work engages with the idea of justice and equality for a safer, more civilized future.

Los Angeles-based artist Martine Syms uses popular American comedy shows to examine the representation of blackness in today's society. Her video, "A Pilot For A Show about Nowhere," recounts the history and impact shows such as *Sanford and Son*, *Family Matters*, and *The Cosby Show* has had on its black viewers through its "proverbial life lessons often involving negotiations of race, class, and gender through specific socioeconomic prisms," as the wall text describes.

Similarly, Aslı Çavuşoğlu, who works and lives in Istanbul, reflects on persecuted populations in her piece, "Long Ago Person Found," by exploring how their remains "are transformed when they become study objects in archives or museum collections."

In a cluster of sculptural forms delegated to the center of the gallery space, Çavuşoğlu reflects on the mass graves discovered in Turkey, abductees from the Dirty War in Argentina and others as she re-creates archeological boxes, which typically house the unidentified remains of Native Americans. Jewelry, combs, and other artifacts sit atop each box and pillar, serving as a monument to each population.

On another pillar nearby sits a glowing figure with ultra dark skin that alternates its subtle glow between iridescent greens and blues. Long, braided locks fall across her figure as she casually reclines in a sideways pose, both genitals exposed—her breast and her penis.

Not only does Frank Benson, the sculpture's creator, bring to focus the current social discussion for the transgender community and their rightful place in our society, but he also exhibits the transgendered body in a beautiful light, as it should be.

A similar portrait of the model, Texas native Juliana Huxtable, hangs on a wall nearby. "UNTITLED IN THE RAGE (NIBIRU CATAclysm)" was created by Huxtable as part of her own series, which explores pop culture tropes as she reimagines herself in them.

Her nude body is painted lime green as her long flowing hair is a bright yellow, referencing the Nuwaubian faith as she poses like a princess.

"UNTITLED IN THE RAGE (PSYCHOSOCIAL STUNTIN)" depicts Huxtable dressed in a trendy militant outfit from the late '90s—pants tucked into knee-high lace-ups and a crop top—while panther skin gives a nod to the Black Panthers.

"I think we are lucky to have a lot of artists in the world right now who are truly trying to invent and establish a unique creative freedom," Trecartin told *The Guardian* of the group of artists born into the expansive digital age.

"It's hard to meditate on potential futures when we are still transitioning out of a period that has been culturally obsessed with defining the past through acts of rejection of fetishization. There are many artists today who are not only looking past older entrenched ways of thinking about art, they are actually *behaving* past it."