

Next Steps

The future is in the hands of young artists at the New Museum.

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT

Like the show itself, the title of the New Museum's rousing triennial, "Surround Audience," succeeds on a few different levels. On the one hand, it's ominous, as if the fifty-one early-career artists and collectives had a mandate to ambush or quarantine viewers and keep them under surveillance. It also suggests a benign enveloping—the group-show equivalent of a Snuggie. The phrase is the brainchild of Ryan Trecartin, who drew raves as a fully formed star for the digital age during the museum's first triennial of emerging artists, "Younger Than Jesus," in 2009. He coorganized this edition with the perspicacious curator Lauren Cornell (who used to helm the online art haven Rhizome), with fewer new-media bells and whistles than you might think.

Granted, there's an Oculus Rift helmet from the Spanish artist Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, which plunges its wearer into the Brazilian rain forest, in underwhelming black-and-white. But there are also paintings, notably the hauntingly weird and refreshingly small oils by the Maine-based artist Sascha Braunig, pioneering a genre that could be called "post-portrait," with facelike forms limned in an irradiated, sci-fi palette. The museum lines its lower level with YouTube videos of Steve Roggenbuck's ranted-word poetry, but it also published a poetry book—a wide-ranging anthology, cheekily titled "The Animated Reader" by its editor, Brian Droitcour.

Over all, a gratifying humanism emerges from this post-human-obsessed generation. The show opens with an iridescent, 3-D-printed sculpture by Frank Benson of the trans artist, d.j., and muse Juliana Huxtable (a former A.C.L.U. legal assistant and self-described "cyborg") reclining nude like a classical odalisque. It's Instagram eye candy and a monument to difference rolled into one. The French Conceptualist Antoine Catala worked with an ad agency to devise a logo for empathy, seen here covered in living coral, submerged in a saltwater tank.

The runaway hit of the show—and the one piece that truly surrounds you—is Josh Kline's galvanic "Freedom." A SWAT team of Teletubbies stand guard in a Zuccotti-like plaza; embedded in their stomachs are video feeds of retired police officers reading scripts culled from social media. On a billboard-size screen, President Obama (a professional actor with a video-mapped face) delivers a rousing speech, reimagining the 2009 inaugural address as a rallying cry against corporate greed, racism, Second Amendment abuses, a cynical media, and a government that fails the citizens it was elected to serve. "Let this be remembered as a day of action," the President says, his face slipping slightly, in Kline's populist elegy to lost hope and broken promises.



In Josh Kline's galvanizing installation "Freedom," Teletubbies stand guard in riot gear.

Illustration by Hannah K. Lee