

# Art in America

“Greater New York”

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by Faye Hirsch

Returning to Greater New York a few days after the Paris attacks, I found myself moved by the main themes underlying the exhibition: our city in particular and urban life in general; and the emergence of queer culture, shown to have percolated steadily in New York over the past quarter century—and arguably yielding one of contemporary Western civilization’s brighter achievements. Throughout the show, one senses a profound pessimism over the direction of the city, but a celebrative attitude toward gay culture, which is here given a narrative of triumph (over the AIDS crisis) and creative flowering.

That week, the film program was featuring Su Friedrich’s *Gut Renovation* (2012), which summarizes the aggressive redevelopment of Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood following a loosening of zoning restrictions by the Bloomberg administration in 2005. On the third floor, I revisited Charles Atlas’s splendid *Here She Is . . . v1* (2015), a wall-projected video starring the drag queen Lady Bunny. The outrageously bewigged and costumed performer lip-synchs a song about the one who got away, then directly addresses us (intermittently silenced, so we must read her lips) about the current state of politics and the world. She pleads for peace and dispenses a homespun but trenchant critique of crisis capitalism and corporate greed. At least one New York subculture thrives, delivering its message in this crisply edited exposition.

As big as this fourth installment of the quinquennial exhibition is—and with more than 400 works by 157 artists filling four floors, Greater New York is very big—it feels strangely manageable. Taking the measure of New York’s sprawling art scene is clearly not the objective of its four curators, Peter Eleey, Mia Locks, Thomas J. Lax and Douglas Crimp. Instead, they offer a carefully crafted view that bounces back and forth between a New York of crumbling infrastructure where poor artists could still thrive, some 30 years ago, and the New York of today, a wealthy enclave that increasingly excludes them. The view skips past the blue-chip and (for the most part) trendy, instead focusing on older-generation artists, alive and dead, whose names should be better known, and younger artists who carry on, consciously or not, in their pioneering steps.

The pacing can be weird, with whole rooms dedicated to bodies of work that should have been edited down—for example, photographs by Henry Flynt (b. 1940) documenting Jean-Michel Basquiat et al.’s SAMO© tags of the late 1970s, and shots by the late Roy Colmar (1934-2014) of downtown facades (“Selections from Doors,” 1976). I am a huge fan of Scott Burton (1939-1989), but why, apart from its sheer loveliness, is his sculptural furniture here, at this particular venue? At these moments one feels like a student being lectured about her lapses: *you really SHOULD know about . . .*

Certain artists are represented in more than one part of the exhibition, and at different points of their careers, which feels a little unfair to the myriad practitioners who are missing. Still, Robert Bordo’s 2015 paintings of a bespectacled face, loosely brushed, show a real continuity from his earlier, more restrained works from the 1990s, displayed separately. And Donald Moffett’s 2003 golden image (a video projection over an oil-and-enamel) of a glittering tunnel in Central Park, near the gay-cruising spot the Ramble, may come as a surprise to those who have only seen his newer multi-medium sculptures. In the same room as Bordo’s recent paintings, Sadie Benning’s meticulously offbeat red, white and blue abstractions show her advance in a medium that she was late in coming to. Perhaps it was pat to group together three generations of painters whose distortions tip toward the grotesque: Peter Saul (b. 1934), Sue Williams (b. 1954) and Jamian Juliano-Villani (b. 1987). But one welcomes their works nonetheless. The room in which we find them is darkened, a bizarre way to see paintings, but in the same space are glowing dioramas by Ajay Kurian, a young Brooklyn-based artist whose tiny, sometimes smoking cities of multicolored found objects and plexiglass require just such lighting.

Throughout the show there is a beautiful sense of a mysterious city of margins and otherness. A film by Loretta Fahrenholz called *Ditch Plains* (2013) features a band of performers, members of the Ringmasters Crew, who breakdance their way through a shadowy city just after Hurricane Sandy. You see

them on the streets in the outer boroughs (East New York, Far Rockaway) as well as in a hotel and a fancy apartment, choreographing a narrative of environmental collapse and sci-fi reanimation. No beats here; the soundtrack is a muffled industrial mash-up. The dancers move jerkily as if guided by alien puppeteers through a city of the dead.

In a big survey like this, I've never seen anything quite like the large second-floor gallery of colorful figurative sculptures by some 18 artists. The sampling ranges from 1980s social realism (John Ahearn's *Maria and Her Mother*, 1987) to 1990s pathos (Kiki Smith's *Lure*, 1995) and identity-based works of more recent vintage (Jeffrey Gibson's *Burn For You*, 2014, a kachina-like figure made of "craft" materials such as agate, beads and copper jingles). Elsewhere, the curators honor trends as far apart as fashion (Susan Cianciolo, the Eckhaus Latta collective) and institutional critique (Louise Lawler's two huge stretched photomurals of artwork on display in different contexts). The scope is broad and ambitious, but the effect never overwhelming. It is a feat that will be difficult to match or surpass in the next iteration, when who knows what forces will have reshaped the city's scene yet again. Like Lady Bunny, we can only hope they are peaceful.