

Budick, Ariella. "New Museum triennial: a chorus of dissenting voices," *The Financial Times*, 23 February 2018.



New Museum triennial: a chorus of dissenting voices

The latest edition of the New York art event casts its net wide but captures a narrow set of political views

Ariella Budick FEBRUARY 23, 2018

If you're sufficiently determined to make an argument, you will inevitably find evidence to support it. Gary Carrion-Murayari and Alex Gartenfeld, organisers of the latest triennial at the New Museum in New York, believe that the art of today is powered by outrage — that the world's most vital young creators express a shared fury at the confluence of money, power and prejudice. The two curators foraged the planet and returned with a multinational collection of 25-to-38-year-old firebrands. The intensity and clarity of their outcry varies, but the museum names their common enemy: "the continuation of colonialism that has never truly ended".

Some of the artists here may have joined the revolution without quite meaning to. This artlessly subtitled triennial, *Songs for Sabotage*, mashes together a scattered assortment of approaches, from dreamy abstraction to crude propaganda, yet suggests that they are all in ideological lockstep. In a tendentious catalogue essay, Carrion-Murayari describes the diverse works as "calls to action against the systems of domination and exploitation of global capitalism today".

That's a weighty burden for, say, the nuanced, radiant pieces of Tomm El-Saieh. Born in Port-au-Prince to a Palestinian-Haitian father and an Israeli mother, El-Saieh grew up in Miami, and it is hard to read either his background or his output for facile political takes. Instead, he creates webs of colour that flutter between recognisable forms and all-over patterning, with a pinch of Pollock's coy delicacy and none of his mental darkness. Lines swoop and wiggle against a thrumming psychedelic backdrop. Vibrating rhythms lull you into a luxuriant trance.

At the other extreme of explicitness, Peruvian provocateur Daniela Ortiz rehashes the clichés of yesteryear. In her proposals for anti-colonial monuments, she uses ceramic models to fantasise about toppling statues of Christopher Columbus and replacing them with politically virtuous totems. For the New York edition, Ortiz imagines beheading the explorer and standing the stone corpse on a plinth crusted with graffiti. "*Viva Palestina Libre*" ("Long Live Free Palestine") reads one scrawl. A stenciled sketch of Hugo Chávez is captioned with the famous insult that the late Venezuelan leader hurled at George W Bush: "*Es usted un burro, Mr Danger*" ("You're an ass, Mr Danger").

The show invokes a range of styles with which artists of the past elided art and politics. Zola, Courbet, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange used clear-eyed realism to expose horrors that many would have preferred to ignore. South African artist Haroon Gunn-Salie is similarly unflinching in the show's most powerful work, "Senzenina", which commemorates the 2012 Marikana miners' strike. Life-sized but headless, the 34 pitch-black figures — one for each person killed by police bullets — crouch in their modest workers' jackets and scuffed shoes, ordinary people made colossal by their martyrdom. Gunn-Salie resurrects them into a spectral army, unforgiving and ready to fight.

In the mid-20th century, the Mexican muralists mixed observation, ideology and imagination in a surreal brew, and that model, too, has its 21st-century counterpart. Zimbabwean painter Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude

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harnesses some of David Siqueiros's colour and rage — though not his narrative clarity. In "The New Zimbabwe", a grimacing figure perches on a high chair, toying with bloody entrails and resting one foot on a checkerboard. Above his head is the motto "*Ushu madzoro*," which translates roughly as "every chief takes his turn". The scene is clearly an indictment of the nation's leaders and compliant citizenry, but the precise meaning remains out of reach. The illegibility is deliberate: under the recently deposed dictator Robert Mugabe, freedom of expression was in short supply, so Nyaude learnt to veil his commentary beneath rainbow-hued blobs and toothy grins.

Elusiveness doesn't just save lives; it also rescues what might otherwise have been an oppressively explicit show. Wilmer Wilson IV, based in Philadelphia, obscures portraits of black subjects behind whorls of gruellingly applied staples — as many as 200,000 at a time. In each image, he leaves only a tiny detail visible: a pair of hands or a set of matching black pumps or a couple of hats. Wilson may well be meditating on surveillance, subjectivity, commodification and the nature of visibility (as a wall text claims), but viewers can be forgiven for ignoring that. Instead, we're dazzled by shimmery surfaces, the uncanny sight of human flesh floating in a metallic sea.



Wilmer Wilson's 'IVAfr' (2017). Courtesy the artist and Connersmith, Washington DC

Of all the possible ways to convey a political point of view, conceptual approaches come off as the least fruitful. The Greek collective Kernel has crafted an opaque sculptural mish-mash on the theme of global finance and urban infrastructure, made out of metal, piping and some bubbling, melty, copper-plated stuff. It's a visual nil, and the accompanying label does nothing to clarify its message.

Similarly, Diamond Stingily's playground swing set, topped with a delicately balanced brick, and Tiril Hasselknippe's suspended steel boxes summon a feeling of precarity but no specific sense of what is threatening whom.

Songs for Sabotage assembles a cosmopolitan chorus line that deserves to be heard and, if the exhibition refuses to hang together, that's not the ensemble's fault. The curators have cast a wide net for a narrow range of political views, amplifying righteous anger from the left but ignoring the populist nationalism that now roils the globe, from Warsaw to Washington to Manila. That lopsidedness made me wonder how thoroughly the New Museum had thought through its own political role. How sincerely can an institution attack the establishment it belongs to? How inflammatory can art be when it's so comfortably ensconced?

One of stars of the 2012 triennial, Danh Vo, went on to a lucrative career skewering the imperialism of consumption. He's now the star of his own Guggenheim retrospective, and his works have sold for up to \$1m in the primary market. His example demonstrates that for all their critiques of global capital, artists know subversiveness can pay.