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ART REVIEW

An Avant-Garde Sampler

At the New Museum, three solo shows by women artists—Marta Minujin, Mika Rottenberg and Lubaina Himid—provide an intriguing window into contemporary installation art and figurative painting.



A view of Marta Minujin's 'Menesunda Reloaded' PHOTO: MARTA MINUJIN/NEW MUSEUM

By Peter Plagens

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New York

The very vertical New Museum of Contemporary Art in lower Manhattan seems like a department store of the avant-garde. If the elevator had an operator attending a control wheel and those collapsing gridded metal doors, he might announce, “Second floor: high-tech, big-budget artist’s films and installation art,” then “Third floor: retro-psychedelic funhouse and grainy black-and-white documentaries from back in the day,” and finally: “Fourth floor, colorful faux-naïf paintings.”

The New Museum’s current offerings are exactly that, with two Argentinian-born artists and one British painter. Together, they constitute a refreshing sampler of the currently popular modes of installation art and deceptively folksy figurative painting, plus a half-century old footnote on how installation art got its South American legs.

Marta Minujin: Menesunda Reloaded
Through Sept. 29

Mika Rottenberg: Easypieces
Through Sept. 15

Lubaina Himid: Work From Underneath
Through Oct. 6

New Museum

Advertisement

The third floor offers a prologue to today’s multifarious scene in the form of “Menesunda Reloaded,” which re-creates Marta Minujin’s 1965 installation “La Menesunda.” Visitors are admitted two or three at a time into a box-like structure and invited to climb or descend narrow stairs, squeeze through passages lined with brightly colored bits of foam rubber, and emerge at the end into small chambers with a live couple lying in bed and a cosmetician dispensing samples. There’s also lots of neon.



Marta Minujin PHOTO: SCOTT RUDD

While the work by Ms. Minujin, who was born in 1943 in Buenos Aires, might have been puzzling when it was first shown in 1965 in Argentina, in this New York iteration it's aged into quaint sincerity and charm. It's like watching mini-skirted teenagers doing the hully-gully on a '60s TV show.

Ms. Minujin's installation and ancillary monitors showing scratchy film of the avant-garde audience of the time—lots of turtlenecks and sideburns—are a way station leading to the big-screen, hi-def, motorized and spare-no-expense immersive presentations we have today. In the New Museum, this is

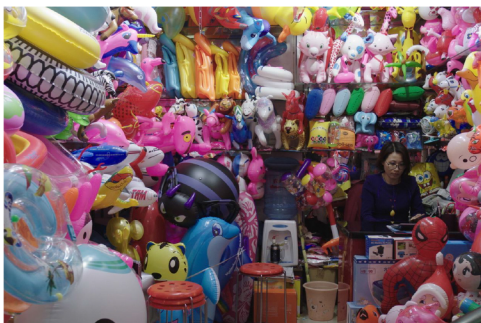
exemplified by a film on the second floor, "Cosmic Generator (Tunnel Variant)" (2017) by Mika Rottenberg (born in 1976, also in Buenos Aires). This witty, empathic and visually stunning work serves as the main feature of her "Easypieces" exhibition. Shot in Mexicali, Mexico, and Yiwu, China, it criticizes the tawdriness of much of global commercialism.



Mika Rottenberg PHOTO: SCOTT RUDD

"Cosmic Generator" cuts back and forth between a desultory Chinese restaurant in Mexicali and market stalls in Yiwu overflowing with glitzy useless cheap goods. The film's jump cuts make it seem as if the two locales are one; the two cities are also perceptually adhered by surrealist sequences of businessmen and a

couple of human tacos making their constricted ways through under-border tunnels, or a metaphorical intestine. Ms. Rottenberg's film implicitly criticizes global capitalism for creating a lot of consumerist junk, but the bright, hi-def beauty of the movie itself distracts us from that critique.



A scene from Mika Rottenberg's 'Cosmic Generator (Tunnel Variant)' (2017) PHOTO: MIKA ROTTENBERG/HAUSER & WIRTH

Smaller works are highlights: In “Ponytail (Orange)” (2016), the tonsorial display protrudes through a hole in a wall and flaps as if attached to a hyperactive high-schooler, and in “AC and Plant” (2018), a leaky old air-conditioner waters a potted plant below, one slow drip at a time. Both of these constitute wry, apolitical comments on the frequent silliness of modern life, and further demonstrate that Ms. Rottenberg is more an artist-artist than the gallery equivalent of an op-ed columnist, increasingly the more common form of artists today.



Lubaina Himid. PHOTO: SCOTT RUDD

Plain old painting appears on the fourth floor, provided by Lubaina Himid, a 65-year-old British artist who was born in Zanzibar. “Work From Underneath” is the first solo museum exhibition in the U.S. for the 2017 Turner-Prize-winner—and comprises all new work. Other than “Old Boat / New Money”

(2019)—a weak installation piece consisting of an undulating row of evenly-spaced leaning planks of different lengths and colors—Ms. Himid’s show consists of two large, alluring paintings (“Three Architects,” all women, and “Six Tailors,” all men, both from this year), a few moderate-size paintings, and a series of small paintings of individual tools. An inscription in one, “Metal Handkerchief – Chisel / Pulley” (2019), contains the exhibition’s title.

All of Ms. Himid’s colorful pictures crackle graphically and possess an understated and affectionate humor. “Three Architects” is especially sharp, with a major red-yellow-blue chromatic framework nicely punctuated by a minor counterpoint of the secondary colors of green, orange, and violet. In the background, out a window, is a gray sea reminding you how pure the other colors are. Ms. Himid’s female figures exude the pride of those in Barkley T. Hendricks’s flattering paintings of 1970s black hipsters, as well as a sense of impending movement fully realized in the New Yorker cover artist Mark Ulriksen’s attenuated baseball and basketball players. This should have been a bigger show, with paintings from earlier years, rather than something approximating a commercial gallery offering.



Lubaina Himid’s ‘Six Tailors’ (2019) PHOTO: LUBAINA HIMID/HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Contemporary art is much too variegated for the New Museum’s three solo shows actually to add up to a one-stop shopping trip that captures its entirety. For those, however, who wish to see how homemade ’60s installation art has morphed into slickly surreal filmmaking and clever little sculptures, and

what painting still has to offer in the midst of all of this, these exhibitions are a required destination.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.