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The Artist Next Door

‘Crossing Brooklyn,’ Local Talent at Brooklyn Museum

By KEN JOHNSON OCT. 2, 2014



All conceivable kinds of artists live and work in Brooklyn. They come from all over the United States and the world. Many of them exhibit regularly in high-profile galleries. Tons more — veterans as well as up-and-comers — are not well known but worthy of notice. So “Crossing Brooklyn: Art from Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Beyond,” an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum billed as a “major survey” of Brooklyn-based artists, should be exciting and revelatory.

Disappointingly, it’s not. Organized by Eugenie Tsai, the museum’s contemporary-art curator, and Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator, this anodyne, 35-artist show favors a particular type of artist: one who engages in the sorts of activities associated with Relational Aesthetics or, more broadly, social practice.

Evidently counted out from the start were artists who toil in studios making paintings, sculptures and other sorts of objects intended just to be looked at. Only one traditional painter was picked: Cynthia Daignault, whose 365 small, nondescript paintings of the sky in various states are installed in a room of their own.

The curators focused mainly on artists who venture outside their workshops to try to involve other people in participatory and interactive events. What's striking about the works selected is how mild they are. There's little that risks offending or alienating anyone.

In their introduction to the exhibition catalog, Ms. Tsai and Ms. Hockley observe that "artists today seem less interested in ambitious structures and organized movements and more interested in personal response and reaction." They speak of an "ethos of individual impact and the powerful accretion of microresponses." They conclude, "We are responsible for our own behavior; through our actions and interactions, we can make a difference in or neighbors', and our own, lives." The ideal artist, they seem to think, is a creative, benevolent teacher who helps people learn to share, care and be nicer to one another.

Miguel Luciano, for example, helped children in Kenya make vinyl kites imprinted with their own, life-size photograph portraits. A selection of these is suspended in the museum. Mr. Luciano also created a movable sculpture called "Pimp My Piragua": a tricycle with a fancy ice box in front that is fashioned like a customized car with a built-in sound system and embedded video screens. With bottles of colored syrups and a block of ice on top, he pedals around town, stopping to serve the Puerto Rican shaved ice confection called piragua. Mr. Luciano will ride the tricycle and offer piraguas to visitors at various times during the exhibition.

A couple of artists are into bartering. Documented by texts, photographs and a video, McKendree Key's "The Den Transaction" consists of a nicely furnished, one-room cabin she built in the backyard of her Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone, where guests may stay in exchange for goods and services. Heather Hart's "Trading Post" is a waist-high block of wood on which she's placed a found object. Viewers are invited to take the object and replace it with one they deem of equal value. On Oct. 25, Ms. Hart will supervise a temporary marketplace called "Bartertown," where visitors may trade with others all kinds of items, including intangibles like songs and ideas. Nobutaka Aozaki sets up outdoors and makes funny portraits of people using a black marker to add their distinctive features to the yellow smiley face on plastic shopping bags. He'll be doing this in the museum during the show.

Dressed in seemingly official uniforms, the three members of a group called "Tatlo" take to the streets where they invite people to sit with them in a portable white kiosk to answer survey questions about life in Brooklyn and the other boroughs. They'll continue their project within the exhibition, where they post filled-in questionnaires on a wall.

Wandering around outdoors is a subject for several artists. Marie Lorenz's videos show her walking around industrial areas from the perspective of a camera attached to her back. We also see her rowing on the East River from the point of view of a camera attached to supports extending from the stern of a boat she designed and built. Yuji Agematsu picks up bits of stuff off the street, which he

presents in a vitrine, like natural history museum specimens. Matthew Jensen hiked the woods of New Hampshire every day of one winter month. On each outing, he collected a bundle of twigs, leaves and dried flowers, shown in the exhibition as pallid still life photographs.

Seen against the historical background of nonstudio avant-gardism, from early 20th-century Dada to Happenings of the 1950s and '60s to the guerrilla performances of Vito Acconci and Adrian Piper in the 1970s, these activities appear woefully innocuous and unadventurous.

There are some works that have more substance either visually or conceptually. Paul Ramírez Jonas's life-size cork statue of a horse on a high pedestal has considerable sculptural presence. It also has a less interesting interactive feature: The pedestal serves as a bulletin board to which visitors may pin whatever things they like.

Drew Hamilton's "Street Corner Project" is a wonderfully realistic, scaled-down replica of a bodega in Bushwick. Kambui Olujimi's kaleidoscopic, symmetrically quartered video projections of slow-moving clouds are hallucinogenically hypnotic.

William Lamson built a raft designed to sink just below the water's surface while holding him afloat, giving the illusion that he's miraculously standing on water. A video of the artist struggling to get up on his craft is amusing, and the passages in which he appears to be standing on the smooth surface of the Delaware River are curiously calming.

Nina Katchadourian presents a triptych of video self-portraits she made in an airplane lavatory. In them, she's costumed herself using paper towels and other available materials to resemble the subjects of Dutch old master portrait paintings, and she's expertly lip-syncing the three harmonies of a Bee Gees song. It's hilarious and gripping to watch and listen to.

Daniel Bejar's conceptually intricate presentation of textual and photographic documents called "The Gaddafi Plot" derives from two odd coincidences: Saadi el-Qaddafi, one of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's sons, planned to flee Libya for Mexico under the name Daniel Bejar, and the younger Mr. Qaddafi physically resembled this Mr. Bejar. It could be the basis for a screwball thriller movie.

For "Trading with the Enemy," Duke Riley bred and trained a flock of homing pigeons to fly from Havana to Key West, Fla. Half the birds carried contraband Cuban cigars. This sounds like fiction, but he really did it, if videos shot from cameras on the other pigeons are to be believed. In the museum, live pigeons will inhabit a small house cobbled together from found materials.

But these more compelling works are outnumbered by tepid, didactic, unoriginal and complacent ones. Brooklyn artists deserve better than this too-small, ideologically blinkered exhibition.

"Crossing Brooklyn: Art From Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Beyond" runs through Jan. 4 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.