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PITTSBURGH REPORT: FIVE PLACES FOR HEALING THROUGH ART

By Martha Schwendener



Alex Da Corte's "Rubber Pencil Devil," from 2018, at the Carnegie International's 57th edition.
Alex Da Corte and Karma New York; Tom Little

For the art world, the biggest news coming out of Pittsburgh last year should have been the opening of the 57th edition of the Carnegie International, the oldest survey exhibition of visual art in the United States. Instead, news of that exhibition was eclipsed in October by a shooting at the progressive Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, which killed 11 people and wounded six.

Art seems minor in the wake of such events. And yet, as time and history stretch out in the aftermath of trauma, art becomes a prime place where tragedy is acknowledged, memorialized and processed.

Art is an inherently hopeful gesture, and as institutions increasingly become forums ("laboratories," in the current parlance) for new ideas — not just places to show off wealth or wield "soft power" — they can be places to heal and ponder how to move forward. In Pittsburgh — where vast sums of money made relatively quickly during the Industrial Revolution were spent on art — museums and alternative spaces abound, complementing many schools and universities. Contemporary art, with its global ambitions, feels right at home. The city was, historically, a magnet for immigrants and home to indigenous peoples. A recent tour of Pittsburgh showed how the vibrant visual arts community, in many ways, offers a model for diversity and tolerance.

Carnegie International, 57th Edition, 2018

This edition of the Carnegie International, organized by Ingrid Schaffner, includes 32 artists and artist collectives — and very few unfamiliar names. The upside of this approach is that many of the artists here are midcareer and know, from experience, how to operate within the potentially homogenizing context of a large exhibition and create exceptional displays. Several here are outstanding, activating the Carnegie Museum of Art's collection and making you think differently about art history.

On the outside of the museum, El Anatsui, the Ghanaian sculptor who has become one of the most imitated artists in Africa, has draped the upper facade of the entrance with a work made from his signature found bottle caps and printing plates sourced from a Pittsburgh printing press. The work treats the museum like a kind of body to be dressed with a garment. Inside the galleries, Ulrike Müller and Sarah Crouner use bright tiles, enamel, weaving and canvases sewn together to test the line between art and craft. Nearby, a terrific presentation of portraits by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye with cryptic titles suggests painting as a portal into the everyday lives of her characters, while Dayanita Singh's installation with lush silver gelatin images bundled in cloth in India questions how history in the form of images is archived and stored.

The boundary between furniture and sculpture is playfully transgressed in Jessi Reaves's fantastic full-room installation, where art and design blend. You're encouraged to sit on the sculpture-furniture. If you make the pilgrimage out to Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's "cabin" masterpiece designed for the family of Edgar J. Kaufmann, you can see Ms. Reaves's sculpture on the terrace, made during a residency there: a lanky homemade shelving unit with an iridescent burgundy zip-on mantle that looks like a sadomasochistic vampire's cape.

Back in the museum, Josiah McElheny, working with the curators John Corbett and Jim Dempsey, shows his MacArthur-award mettle with an expertly researched display. Curious musical instruments and documents relate to maverick composers like Harry Partch, Pauline Oliveros and Lucia Dlugoszewski, who created sculptural wooden instruments that are one of the standouts of the installation.

Two artists who engage with the Carnegie's collection in innovative ways are Karen Kilimnik and Jeremy Deller. Mr. Deller has installed tiny video screens in window-size cases in the museum, turning historical displays of upscale living rooms into updated everypersons' dollhouses. Ms. Kilimnik is exhibiting her effusively florid paintings alongside the Carnegie's decorative arts collection, as if to show how the salon-style hang, created to bring art (and intellectual discourse) to mass audiences in the French salons of the 18th and 19th centuries, could also be a form of aspirational kitsch.

One of the most ambitious presentations here is the terrific show-within-a-show, "Dig Where You Stand," organized by the Cameroon-born Koyo Kouoh, with research contributed by graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh. Drawing from the collections of the Carnegie Museums for what she calls a "visual essay," she points out that changing language is the taproot of changing ideas. She wants us to rethink "coloniality" — different forms of colonialism and occupation — since Africa, she points out in the guide, is a continent with 54 very different countries; the one thing they all share is that they were colonized.

Throughout the ocher-colored space she has paired objects and images to make you question their origins and messages. African sculptures sit near Mickalene Thomas's photograph of black women assuming the pose from a famous Manet painting. Screenprints by Kara Walker are juxtaposed with a cutout silhouette of an "honorable" gentleman holding a whip.

Ms. Kouoh throws all categories into a quandary. Bernd and Hilla Becher's black-and-white photographs of outdated industrial structures in Germany — considered landmarks of conceptual art — are shown next to Teenie Harris's photographs of a 1950s home-appliance fair for African-Americans in Pittsburgh. What defines art history and constitutes a survey museum? What's included, championed and omitted — and how do those decisions reflect colonial and racist history? The implication is that every encyclopedic museum is probably sitting on a trove of exceptional objects that could be artfully rearranged to promote diversity, inclusion and tolerance, rather than acquisition and power. (Unless, of course, all the art should be "repatriated" and sent back to where it was made, though "home" may no longer exist.)