

NEW YORK

MAGAZINE

The New Museum's 'Trigger' Is Radical in Content, Retrograde in Form: What Should We Make of That?

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October 23, 2017



Photo: Liz Collins, *Cave of Secrets*, 2017. Installation with mixed mediums. Courtesy the artist

I wish I didn't feel as conflicted as I do about "Trigger: Gender As a Tool and a Weapon," the New Museum's scattershot, building-filling group show about "gender beyond the binary." There is plenty to admire in the show, organized by Johanna Burton, including new artists worth celebrating and the greater political cause: to cry havoc at the rising tides of hatred and sketch out the new landscape of identity-driven, gender-politics-inflected art. But "Trigger" does not ultimately deliver on that promise, mostly because it fails to showcase new forms of disruptive radicalism. For an exhibition about things "blurred," "trans," and *not* "normative," "Trigger" is laden with art that too neatly fits into totally known and familiar lineages, namely post-conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s. The result is that — much as I wished the show could be — "Trigger" cannot be rightly called a new Transavantgarde (after the explosive 1980s Italian art movement).

But it does have some very good and interesting work in it.

There are at least a half-dozen artists in the show using fabric, collage, embroidery, and other malleable materials to make art out of bits and pieces so that “Trigger” exhibits a strong subset of artists who indulge a fabulous Proustian drive to devour materials and processes in minutiae — including Ellen Lesperance’s reversal of this process using super-close-up pictures of knitted fabrics to make geometric drawings. Tschabalala Self, 27, makes black personages — I imagine some as randy gods — out of paint and fabric, sewn and collaged into portraits that have the visage of some black Baroque Artemisia Gentileschi. Self’s more material works echo a promising crop of other young painters of color who are doing similar crackling things more painterly, including recent MacArthur winner Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Toyin Ojih Odutola (whose current Whitney project sizzles), Louis Fratino, Alex Chaves, Nina Chanel Abney, and Amy Sberaldo, who was all but unknown when she was rightfully picked to paint Michelle Obama’s official portrait. Meanwhile, back at “Trigger,” Leidy Churchman’s hot-pink *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine* combines Marsden Hartley’s brawny 1940 masterpiece *Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy* and Soutine’s flaming color. Christina Quarles makes a splash here with tightly composed, kaleidoscopically colored figurative painting. Ditto Vaginal Davis with her fetishistic friezelike portrait fragments painted in neon nail lacquer. Justin Vivian Bond’s self-portraits and wall-papered mise-en-scene exude love and pathos. I covet both of the Sadie Benning wood cutout paintings here.

On the gnarlier sculptural side of the tracks there’s Nayland Blake, resourceful and intellectually ornery when he needs to be, who calls his life-size bear-bison a “fursona ... an avatar in the furry community.” The beaded remakes of Zulu masks of Curtis Talwst Santiago and the porny self-portraits of Paul Mpagi Sepuya strike sparks. (Almost everything I’ve seen by both of these emerging multi-styled artists has caught my eye.) The lecture video by Gregg Bordowitz perfectly combines poetry and pedagogy. If you missed Simone Leigh’s Afrofuturist performance at the opening, find it online.

The showstopper is Mickalene Thomas’s video installation of the artist sprawled naked like some black Ingres *Odalisque* accompanied by Eartha Kitt, talking about how easy it is to find a man to lie down with but how hard to find one to lift you up.

That is all on the good and exciting side of the ledger. Yet at the same time that “Trigger” opens up discourse, it simultaneously tightens aesthetic restrictions. And the show does feel narrow, in its way. Absent are the crazed paintings of Tabboo! (a.k.a. Stephen Tashjian, whose current Gordon Robichaux show delights); drag performance artist

Kalup Linzay; Zackary Drucker's photographic muddying of gender; Matthew Weinstein's haunting fish videos; or Genesis P-Orridge, who with his — now her — late wife Lady Jaye, surgically altered their bodies to look like one another. "Barbarian" artists like these remain at the gate. None of them fit any aesthetic status quo — but all hint at liberations of art, style, materials, bodies, gender, whatever "I" is, even society.

Identity assertion is a pressing political cause, especially when it's practiced by those who have for so long been asked to hide the core of who they are. Or worse, deny it. But identity alone does not great art make.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial, which set so many future courses, also featured identity-driven work from all over the map but much of this work also innovated formally, from artists like Fred Wilson, Coco Fusco, Renee Green, Lorna Simpson, Zoe Leonard, Andrea Fraser, Charles Atlas, Byron Kim, Gary Simmons, Jimmie Durham, Daniel J. Martinez and Sadie Benning. "Trigger"'s issues are more or less the same, which is fine; but its forms are virtually unchanged, as well, which isn't. "Trigger" has too much art whose main message is either "I'm beautiful because I'm me" or "I'm a great student of 1960s and 1970s art history."

That lineage — and that leaning — weighs down "Trigger." As with many shows these days, there's art here that mainly exists in the artist's head or in long-winded explanatory written paragraphs. All this would be welcome if these works only had more visual, formal, physical, material, imaginative, or conceptual originality. Just like the wider art world, then, "Trigger" features work deemed worthy because it's being done in a style or cause already deemed worthy. Tropes like the darkened souk setting, disco ball, film loops of refracted light, and big empty stage have been in every show like this since 1980. We need to ask if it's productive to do shows that deconstruct or critique artistic power structures while simultaneously buttressing aesthetic convention.

And yet still ... Now that I've offered my main criticism, I'll lay my "Trigger" cards on the table and say what else I also love about this show. First, forgive my local boosterism but with New York real estate squeezing artists hard, amen that almost two-thirds of "Trigger"'s artists work here. Our artists dearly need the support of local gallerists, critics, and curators.

But my favorite thing about "Trigger" is that everything in it was made in the past ten years. That might not sound like anything, but it's a lot. Because amid this current political crisis just when we need to be seeing how artists are reacting in the here and now, the art world remains in an extended 40-year period where many curators, critics,

and gallerists continue the grand project of correcting art history. This project was initiated beautifully by curators like Marcia Tucker, Alanna Heiss, Okwui Enwezor, Thelma Golden, Catherine David, Massimiliano Gioni, and countless others — a project brilliantly continued in the Obama years.

It goes without saying that this project can never be abandoned. But in these dire times the present calls to us. Even if artists are only making sewn portraits or responding to our ugly times by making beautiful things we need to see them, because the content of *now* will be in their work because they are working *now*. Yet numerous gallerists, critics, and curators are still allocating much time, money, and space to rediscovering unknown, under-known, and deceased artists. Some of the art touted is deserving; some of it is not; most of it reinforces all the usual above-mentioned dynastic lineages and artistic kinships. Thus, ironically, the aesthetic walls are tightening, not loosening.

Out of curiosity I tallied all the full-page color ads for gallery solo shows in the September and October issues of *Artforum*. This admittedly top-heavy sampling still made me feel the chill of an aging art world. Almost 70 percent of the ads were for artists 60 and older, or dead; almost all of them working in stylistic modes we're accustomed to; and most of them already famous. This at the exact moment when there are more artists graduating from art schools than ever. Thus, we are enforcing aesthetic immigration clampdowns at the same time that we descend into a new culture of hate and repressive politics, queer rights being rescinded, seeing bodies on the line, and a culture in shock after seemingly moving so far forward under Obama only to see the left turn against itself. In this cold climate — and as each of us exists in this private hell of daily outward witnessing and personal love of art — a formally retrograde academic fog is still settled generally over our beautiful art world.

I love that “Trigger” tries to rise to the call of the present. There's a lot of great art getting made out there. And getting shown. This only needs to continue. All younger critics, curators, and collectors need to make it their business to seek this work out — in the flesh, whenever possible. Even questioning or being critical of it if need be. That's how we show art respect. The New Museum has always been outstanding at all these things, as have other local museums, galleries, and alternative spaces. As for “Trigger,” I hope it's one of many museum, gallery, group, and solo shows devoted to art being produced here and now in this time of emergency — and that this will carry on for the next four, or God forbid, eight years.