

HYPERALLERGIC

Resolutely Political LA Artists Focus on the Body in the City's Latest Biennial

The body is at the center of much of the work in Made in LA, and overwhelmingly, that body is brown and black, female, queer, and indigenous.

Matt Stromberg June 4, 2018



Carolina Caycedo, from her “Cosmotarrayas” series (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — On Sunday, June 3 the fourth iteration of the Hammer Museum’s Los Angeles biennial, Made in LA, opened to the public, featuring the work of 33 artists, from emerging to mid-career, and some long overlooked. Although all the artists currently live in Los Angeles, Hammer Director Ann Philbin remarked that “it kind of is an international exhibition” at a press preview on Friday, with artists hailing originally from 13 states and seven countries.



Luchita Hurtado, “Untitled” (1971), oil on canvas (both works)

The show lacks a clear-cut central theme — not surprisingly, considering Los Angeles’s heterogeneous nature — however, co-curator Erin Christovale, who organized the show with Hammer curator Anne Ellegood, pointed out that the body is at the center of much of the work: the political body, the contested body, the reclaimed body. Overwhelmingly, that body is brown and black, female, queer, and indigenous. These artists are responding to political, cultural, and

environmental crises, both on national and global levels, but also focusing on the hyper-local, from the African American community of South Los Angeles, to the Tongva people, the area’s first residents.

Although the show aims to challenge the status quo in terms of who is represented, traditional media like painting and sculpture are still prominently featured, proving you don’t need to chase current technological trends to be disruptive. The last Made in LA biennial in 2016 focused much more on institutional critique and expanding the boundaries of art, from Todd Gray’s sartorial performance piece that existed mostly outside the museum to Guthrie Lonergan’s website interventions. Even the name of the show, “a, the, though, only,” was a work by poet Aram Saroyan. This time around, the emphasis is on the here and now, as material, craft, and the object take precedence.



Christina Quarles

Some of these artists represent the body itself, as with paintings by Christina Quarles, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, and 97-year old artist Luchita Hurtado, who has two bodies of work from the late '60s and early '70s on view. In one series, the geometric designs of floor rugs are interrupted by her nude body parts, monumental and unapologetic, as seen from her point of view. (Showcasing the work of late-career artists like Hurtado who are finally getting their due seems to be a pattern with *Made in LA*, following the inclusion of artists like [Huguette Caland](#) and [Kenzi Shiokova](#) in 2016.) Charles Long's room-size installation is an ambitious phallus-filled fantasy, though the numerous members are depicted in castrated cross-section, a hopeful vision of the death of the patriarchy.



Charles Long

Other artists only imply the body, creating sculptures or environments that invite participation from viewers, or stand in as evidence of past events or uncharted histories. Lauren Halsey's "Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project" features 600 white gypsum boards onto the surface of which the artist has carved images of Afro-Futurist utopia, signs and scenes from her South Los Angeles neighborhood, and the names of African Americans killed by police. Assembled into a temple-like structure that visitors can walk through, it is a prototype for a larger edifice that will

function as a cultural center and gathering place in South Los Angeles.



Lauren Halsey, "Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project" (2018)

Hanging over the central courtyard, Carolina Caycedo's gossamer assemblages are made from fishing nets gathered in Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil, and Mexico — Latin American countries where Caycedo has documented the deleterious ecological and social effects that dams have had on various waterways and the indigenous populations that rely on them to survive.

Naotaka Hiro creates his tumultuous abstract canvases by wrapping them around himself, his bodily limitations shaping the compositions. Some of these process-based

works feature large holes where his legs poked through. EJ Hill's installation "Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria" (2018) documents his durational performance, for which he ran victory laps around every school he attended in Los Angeles, both a gesture of futility and a recognition of the hurdles he had to jump to succeed. He has written on the wall in neon letters: "Where on earth, in which soils and under what conditions will we bloom brilliantly and violently?," alluding to an unyielding drive to persevere.



Naotaka Hiro (back), Mercedes Dorame (front)

Issues of identity — hybrid, intersectional, and complicated — are also taken up by several artists like Tongva artist Mercedes Dorame, whose photographs document the Malibu home that her non-Native grandparents live in, sited on land that once belonged to the Tongva. Another series chronicles her father's work as a cultural resource consultant, helping relocate native artifacts once they are discovered on construction sites. African American artist Diedrick Brackens incorporates both

European and West African weaving techniques into his textiles works, fusing strands of his lineage in works that depict autobiographical scenes.



Diedrick Brackens

Not all the works in Made in LA address specific crises or events, though it would be hard not to see reflections of the current divisive political and social landscape throughout. Eamon Ore-Giron's large-scale mural "Angelitos Negros" takes its name from a 1943 Venezuelan poem decrying racism, while its dynamic geometric composition draws on precedents from European and American modernism, as well as indigenous designs. On the large wall, he has painted an abstracted form of the

Southern Cross, a constellation only visible from the Southern Hemisphere, challenging entrenched hierarchies on a global scale.

One criticism that avid Angeleno gallery-goers may have is a familiarity with some of the work. Caycedo's nets — part of a multi-year project — were recently on view at Westlake gallery Commonwealth & Council, and similar works by Hiro were shown at The Box last year. There are still many new discoveries, however — like Linda Stark's astonishingly labor-intensive canvases — especially for out-of-towners and those not as familiar with LA's far-flung art world. And if the result of this saturation is recognition and visibility for some very deserving artists, we should not bemoan the fact that their time has finally arrived.