

Chicago Tribune

Abstraction, explained



Detail from *Panspermatic Drift*, a 2015 work by Zipporah Camille Thompson. (Zipporah Camille Thompson)

[Lori Waxman](#)

May 31, 2018

When you think of an abstract artist, do you picture a lean, scruffy white guy in paint-splattered pants, cigarette dangling from lip, furiously engaged in sweeping gestures that render his guttural actions directly on a titanic canvas?

No?

Oh, good. No need to dispel the stereotypes of gender, race and aesthetics that have steered the term abstract since the era [Jackson Pollock](#) and his Abstract Expressionist brethren, bypassing a vast range of non-representational practices. Over the past few years, a spate of ambitious national exhibitions have attempted to correct this misdirected course, including “Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction 1960s to Today” at the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, “Revolution in the Making: Abstract

Sculpture by Women 1947-2016” at Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles, and “Outside the Lines” at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The most recent effort is “Out of Easy Reach,” a sure-to-be-influential local initiative, full of novel and challenging artwork by a multigenerational array of women artists of color, installed across Chicago through early August.

“Out of Easy Reach,” guest curated by Allison M. Glenn, seems determined to eschew singularity. Rather than one location, there are three: the DePaul Art Museum in Lincoln Park, Gallery 400 in the West Loop and Stony Island Arts Bank in Greater Grand Crossing. The two dozen artists are female identified — women or trans — and they range in age from 26 to 78. A majority are African-American, but Puerto Rico, Mexico, the Caribbean Islands and Iran figure among their genealogies too. Their work, nearly all of which was produced in the past decade, ranges from taxonomically displayed hairpieces to spare calligraphy, photographs-in-photographs and powerfully crushed paper. Perhaps it would be easier to simply say what “Out of Easy Reach” is not: not male, not white, not strictly formal, not especially figurative.

Why these details matter is the difference between replacing one stereotype with another and refusing stereotype altogether. The strength of “Out of Easy Reach” is that it explodes strict notions of what can and can’t be thought of as abstraction. Its weakness is that it leaves the remains sprawled out and damaged on the gallery floor. Curatorial themes are restrictive at best, and too many strong artists — such as Leslie Hewitt and Abigail DeVille — are represented by a solitary artwork. The viewer is left to pick up the pieces, focusing on individual standouts and making connections across far-flung venues.

Fortunately, there is plenty of good art here, even some great, by artists both familiar and not. New to me were Ayanah Moor and Juliana Huxtable, both of whom use text to shake up, with wit and flair, the presumptions about gender and desire built into popular culture, be it back issues of Ebony magazine or 1980s video games. Artists recognizable from recent or current solo shows elsewhere in Chicago include Howardena Pindell at the [MCA](#), Torkwase Dyson at the Graham Foundation, Jennie C.

Jones at Patron Gallery and Candida Alvarez at the Cultural Center. Their presence in “Out of Easy Reach” feels like confirmation and contextualization rather than reiteration. Hopefully there will be another monographic show to come, somewhere, for showstopper Shinique Smith.

Smith’s awesome “Forgiving Strands” fills a room with enormous stuffed and tied fabric garlands, hung from the rafters like a festive cross between a rummage sale, a sausage factory and a migration disaster. Fashioned from plaid flannels, floral bedsheets, sequined nylons, handmade batiks, cheap leopard prints and every domestic textile in between — including the duffel bags, still bearing airline tags, that the artist must have packed it all in — the strands suggest Kantha necklaces, elaborate hair braids, intestines, dream catchers, and even DNA.

Installed at the Arts Bank, Smith’s hangings offer one possible nucleus for “Out of Easy Reach,” generating endless formal, cultural and conceptual echoes with artworks near and far. Their catenaries hug the curves in Sheree Hovsepian’s photograms, layered with stretches of arced pantyhose in what might be called femme modernism. Their more ethnicky geometric motifs recall the unplaceable patterns in Lisa Alvarado’s hand-painted neon tapestries and also Edra Soto’s “GRAFT,” a white wooden screen built to fit the glass front of DPAM and based on rejas, the ornate metal screen walls commonly found in Puerto Rican homes. Patterns pack so much more than decoration.

A likeness to human hair winds from Smith’s strands to Barbara Chase-Riboud’s formidable “Little Gold Flag,” a gleaming crumpled bronze mask set atop a thick cascade of silky golden locks. Both suggest the body but without needing to represent it directly. Kellie Romany does likewise with “In an effort to be held,” a long tabletop crowded with palm-sized clay vessels, their interiors stained with oil paint in every shade of brown: areolae, navels, eyes, dried blood. Yvette Mayorga’s five “Monuments” do this too: people-sized towers constructed of plaster blocks, covered in toy guns, party decorations and bright drippy frosting, they are the remains of a party gone grotesquely wrong. Zipporah Camille Thompson’s “panspermatic drift,” a hideously beautiful cluster of

inner tubes, yellow-beige silk, matted brown wool, lint, shiny black garbage bags and fake gold animals, could be the flotsam of a maritime wreck, bodies included.

Is all of this really abstraction? Dyson points the way toward one kind of answer in her essay “Black Interiority,” an excerpt of which is included in the exhibition catalog. In it she discusses abstract representation and political abstraction, both of which are visible in her inky pen and brush drawings, compositions that sketch out slave auction blocks and other types of racist forms. “I begin to understand,” she writes in what could be a motto for non-white, non-male abstract artists, “that surviving abstraction through abstraction is my formal project today.”

“Out of Easy Reach” runs through Aug. 5 at DePaul Art Museum, 935 W. Fullerton Ave., 773-325-7506, museums.depaul.edu; Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria St., 312-996-6114, gallery400.uic.edu; and Stony Island Arts Bank, 6760 S. Stony Island Ave., 312-857-5561, www.rebuild-foundation.org.