

# THE NEW YORKER

## The Art World as Safe Space

*The New Museum's "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" is milder than its title suggests. Even so, it still packs a punch or two.*

By Peter Schjeldahl October 9, 2017 Issue



*"Beautiful Mourning," by Christina Quarles, revives formal invention.*  
Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami

The four nouns in the title of a large group show at the New Museum, “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” go off like improvised explosive devices, boding civil strife. Not to worry. The works, by forty-two mostly L.G.B.T.Q.-identified artists, who range in age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven, artist teams, and collectives tend to be elegant and ingratiating, temperate, or even a little boring—though not unpleasantly so. (A little boredom may come as welcome relief to our lately adrenaline-overdosed body politic.) The pieces employ mediums familiar from the past couple of decades of shows of institutionally favored contemporary art—installations, text pieces, photography, a great many videos—but reveal an uptick in the fortunes of expressive painting and a corresponding sag in those of starchy Conceptualism. With few exceptions, “Trigger” requires no warnings. Its themes of fluid sexual identity don’t fulminate at the margins of art-world convention. They evince establishment nonchalance. The show’s provocative title turns out to function rather like the old vaudeville pistol that emits a little flag imprinted “*BANG!*”

I am not complaining! The prospect of broaching a probable minefield of group sensitivities—“Suicide mission,” a young friend of mine remarked, mildly, when I told him that I would review the show—is apt to rattle anyone these days, let alone an old straight white male like me. But, once there, I found myself thrilling to rare examples of the aggressive affront that I had expected, such as a series of fantastically nasty small works by the reliably dazzling Los Angeles-born, Berlin-based, biracial, transgender artist and performer Vaginal Davis: abstract reliefs that suggest mangled faces, viscera, and genitalia, painted in a blood-red mixture of substances, including nail polish. Black artists account for most works in the show that pack punches. One is Mickalene Thomas, whose images on a bank of twelve video monitors address the classic motif of the odalisque, which is reënacted, at intervals, by Thomas in the nude, to a soundtrack of the actress Eartha Kitt recounting, with defiant buoyancy, a lifetime of racial insult and sexual abuse: “Me As Muse” (2016). The toils of racism in American society lend drama to anything that touches on them. Those of bias against sexual minorities logically should do so, too, but the show projects the art world as, yes, a safe space for the variously denominated. The question arises whether this heralds a reality or a utopia. The answer, at least within the cultural ambit of the New Museum, may be: both.

“Trigger” arrives on two tracks: the art and the attendant discourse. The head curator, Johanna Burton, convened a committee of academics to help plan the show. The chewy catalogue presents roundtable discussions that review the legacies of four previous exhibitions at the museum: “Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art” (1982); “Difference: On Representation and Sexuality” (1984-85); “*HOMO VIDEO*: Where We Are Now” (1986-87); and “Bad Girls” (1994). Those shows kicked up controversies, documented in the catalogue, about who was representing whom. “Extended Sensibilities” struck some critics in the gay community, at the time, as too preciously refined. “Bad Girls” took flak from serious-minded feminists as too friskily blithe. Use of the word “gender”—in lieu of “sex,” “sexuality,” or “sexual orientation”—wasn’t prevalent yet. Indeed, as a tool and as a weapon, the term has served to sabotage thinking along traditional male/female lines—while inflicting collateral damage, which Burton’s advisers disarmingly note, on clear thought along much of any lines at all. Burton declares, at the outset of the transcribed conversations, “a paralysis within discourse” regarding identity politics.

The black poet and theorist Fred Moten, a formidable presence in the discussions and a charismatic one in the show, goes farther, calling the roundtable “part of this general group of folks who used identity as a weapon, but the primary target of the weapon was identity. We used politics as a weapon, and the primary target was politics.” Moten proposes, as an alternative to “gender,” the word “blur.” He dismisses cogency as an aim for the show: “There’s a poetics of the mess, you know.” He says, “So, we came here to tear shit up, you know? Including ourselves. We came to fail.” Moten, fifty-five years old, performs in a video projection by a longtime female collaborator, Wu Tsang: “Girl Talk” (2015). Large and bearded, seen in a back yard sashaying in a wafting red caftan and crystal pendants, he sings, infectiously if not always intelligibly, about the pleasures of gossip. He is terrific. Cushions are provided for relaxed viewing. Highly recommended.

You will not soon forget another video that is also enhanced with comfortable seating: “Weed Killer” (2017), by the English-born Patrick Staff, in which an actor hauntingly recites passages from “The Summer of Her Baldness,” a 2004 memoir by the artist, curator, and scholar Catherine Lord, interspersed with neon-intense abstract imagery of hair and evil-looking shapes. The subjects include chemotherapy—“like mainlining weed killer” and enough “to make you crazy miserable, but not enough to put you out of your misery”—and depression, which may elicit support from friends until they succumb to “compassion fatigue.” (What do you do then? Like the actor in the video, go out and tend your garden.) Autobiography that is either personal or, as in Staff’s case, channelled informs much of the show’s strongest work, exploiting, for art’s sake, the odd angles on life of uncommon people.

The happiest surprise in “Trigger” is a trend in painting that takes inspiration from ideas of indeterminate sexuality for revived formal invention. Two painters who stand out are Tschabalala Self and Christina Quarles. Each rhymes ambiguous imagery of gyrating bodies with dynamics of disparate pictorial techniques. Self’s figures look wild but are made of assorted fabrics neatly stitched to her canvases. The wholes and parts of bodies in Quarles’s cheerfully orgiastic pictures entangle in alternating styles of line, stroke, stain, and smear. This may be just me, but both artists called to mind early nineteen-forties Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, who fractured Picassoesque figuration on the way to physically engaging abstraction. I see Self and Quarles playing that process in reverse, adapting abstract aesthetics to carnal representation. Whether intentionally or not, they effectively return to an old well that suddenly yields fresh water. Styles fade into history when they use up their originating impulses. New motives may snap them back to vitality, albeit, here, to sophisticated rather than disruptive effect.

In general, the younger the artist in the show the more well behaved. For weaponized weirdness, consider the accomplished and influential elder Nayland Blake, who is fifty-seven. Blake’s sculptural work in many mediums has often reflected a fondness for a form of kink that involves dressing as an animal. The show features one such costume—a bear. Blake is scheduled to don it on certain days, and has promised to offer furry hugs to willing viewers. There’s an air of renegade yesteryear about this antic effrontery, from the era in which Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of sadomasochistic gay practices fuelled a culture war that, in 1989, reached the floor of the U.S. Senate. Put simply, newer artists appear to feel little need to fight for their proclivities—an unexciting but surely positive development. “Gender” agitation cast itself as political, but perhaps most significantly it achieved a revolution in manners, instilling first

tolerance, then acceptance, and, finally, respect for formerly repressed human natures. The ultimate stage is liberty for individuals to inhabit society without fear, unedited, as they are. Political dissension may persist, but one roundtable participant, Eric A. Stanley, a professor of gender and sexuality studies, hazards at least a potential last word: “It’s like, do we want to be right, or do we want to be free?” ♦



“Mane”, by Tschabalala Self, from 2016.

Courtesy the artist and Thierry Goldberg