

# HYPERALLERGIC

## When Artists Carry the Burden of History

*No burden as heavy*, on view at David Castillo Gallery, feels like a response to history's weight: how heavily the past's truths and fictions weigh, how often they (for better or worse) repeat themselves.

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*No burden as heavy* at David Castillo Gallery, installation view (all images courtesy David Castillo Gallery)

MIAMI — In Milan Kundera's 1984 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he examines Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal return and its inverse, lightness. To paraphrase crudely: eternal return dictates that all existence must recur endlessly, never improving or changing. Existence is thus heavy, "the heaviest of burdens," an infinite cycle doomed to repetition. And yet, this also allows for meaning, equally unmoving and unchanging; nothing is fleeting, because everything is forever. Lightness states that, in fact, eternal return is impossible, that existence is unburdened, and that everything is fleeting and insignificant.

*No burden as heavy*, currently on view at David Castillo Gallery, feels like a response to history's weight: how heavily the past's truths and fictions weigh, how often they (for better or worse) repeat themselves. Here, lightness is found not through eternal return's inverse but through its pliancy — that history is subject to reinterpretation. Its malleability renders us doomed neither to repetition nor fleeting insignificance, but to a fate of responsibility in which we are storytellers.



From left: Quisqueya Henriquez, “Carmen Herrera Inside Popova” (2013), digital photograph printed on Hannemuller museum paper, graphic pattern printed on fine art paper mounted on Dibond; Sanford Biggers, “Jonquil” (2017), plywood, antique quilt, gold leaf

In a description of the show, there is mention of history's “pastiche.” Sanford Biggers's “Jonquil” (2017) and “Narcissus” (2017) are constructed from patchwork quilts, etched with gold leaf and placed onto many-planed plywood sculptures that recall Japanese origami. Biggers has worked with quilts before — as in his 2015 solo show *Matter* (also at David Castillo)— to reference the antebellum South and the idea that quilts were used to discretely map safe spaces along the Underground Railroad. Though the veracity of this practice has been disputed, quilts are often stories themselves, and these works tell a history of violence and, in its face, quiet tenacity. “Narcissus,” of course, alludes to the Greek myth of the hunter who fell in love with his own face and stared at it until he died. It's an especially pathetic instance of

self-involvement, and the name reduces colonialists and slave-owners to their hubris. They helped write history, but so, too, did those who suffered at their hands.

Xaviera Simmons's photograph, "Line (Red)" is a snowy landscape, cut in half by a massive block of deep red. Simmons's photographic work spans 15 years, and she often places characters — usually played by herself, in an array of poses — into various landscapes, the setting transformed by the presence of a body. Bodies carry their own specific histories, feelings, even potential futures; Simmons's landscapes become contingent upon who's in them and what, in turn, is inside *them* (it's pseudoscientific to assume we store emotions, sexuality, and memory in the body, but it doesn't feel inaccurate). The space might become more or less fertile or quiet, the body more or less exposed — they respond directly to each other. "Line (Red)," though, is absent of a character. Instead, it contains a visual pause, the swath of maroon almost more mesmerizing than the snow. Without prior knowledge of Simmons's work, the disrupted image is still stark, more a sudden movement than a landscape. In the specific context of her oeuvre, though, we are asked to consider what a landscape nary a body to occupy it might contain — who once occupied it, and who will.



From left: Xaviera Simmons, "Line (Red)" (2016), color photograph; Robert Mele, "Unidentified Semi Monic Substitution" (2017), beer bottle caps, plaster, enamel on wood

The show's context is broad, and some of the pieces address its theme more loosely. I liked Pepe Mar's "The Moon" and "The Machine," two fabric collages of materials sourced from the artist's earlier work. Mar's own history is called for reexamination and, incidentally, so is the lineage of the works' former display. Shinique Smith, too, draws from her own past, frequently utilizing fabrics and objects from her grandmother's house. Her piece "Eutaw Place" refers to the Baltimore address where she spent part of her youth. I wondered if the composition book, placed below it, was once hers.



From left: Wendy White, "Puma vs. Adidas," "EA Sports," "Tek" (2014), acrylic on canvas, gold mirror, and PVC custom frame; Carlos Rolón/Dzine, "Untitled" (2016), mirror, silicone, crystalline on aluminum panel  
Kate Gilmore, "Sweetheart" (2016), wood, enamel primer, paint

One of Jillian Mayer's "Slumpie" sculptures ("Slumpie 32") sits at the gallery's center. The turquoise structures are designed to cradle a body contorted by text neck; Mayer provides a headrest for public texters. The invoked past here is the one being created in real-time, as the "Slumpies" respond to technological codependence and its growing ubiquity. More generally, they speak to possible futures, to writing history as it happens.

The story of the past is continually reworked, reshaped, and expanded — it is the burden of many, and certainly heavy. In Christina Quarles's fittingly titled painting "Boy Yer Gunna

Carry That Weight,” there is a colorful body, deeply hunched as if it were Atlas, holding something gray and uncomfortable. Some bodies hold more of the weight. Others have taken it upon themselves to carry and, consequently, shift it.

No burden as heavy *continues at David Castillo Gallery (420 Lincoln Road, Suite 300, Miami Beach) through August 31.*