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In San Francisco, Wielding Influence (Gently) Through Art

“Soft Power” looks at how creativity helps to shape society.



In his “Encyclopedia of Invisibility,” Tavares Strachan said he was “revealing a layer of something that’s been obscure or invisible.” Credit...Tavares Strachan; Photo: Brooke DiDonato

By Ted Loos

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Museums are culturally influential, but the space inside them is tight. Not everything fits, so choices must be made.

In the old days, the stories that museums picked to tell weren’t questioned too much. Lately doors have been opened to different kinds of stories, changing our perceptions of

the types of material that fit into the citadel of high culture. When done right, it makes the institutions feel roomier than ever, not cramped.

“[Soft Power](#),” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through mid-February, epitomizes its era in that it looks self-consciously at the ways in which cultural influence is exerted, with special attention to previously hidden voices.

“The title is a twist on the Reagan-era phrase,” said Eungie Joo, the museum’s curator of contemporary art, who conceived the show.

In the late 1980s, the phrase, [coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr., the political scientist](#), was employed in a foreign policy context. It referred to the ability of the United States to influence countries’ behavior without coercion or force, through cultural institutions, universities, churches, media or other civic means.

For Ms. Joo, it helped her organize her thoughts about “a generation of artists who are concerned with their role in society as citizens and social actors.”

The exhibition features 20 artists, some of whom have done special commissions for it, and it has an international flavor — perhaps ironically, given the title’s original all-American slant. Many of the participants were born outside of the United States or work in other countries.



The roster includes some contributors like the American photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier, who have had substantial museum exposure, and others like the Turkish artist Cevdet Erek who may be new to viewers.

A detail from Mr. Strachan’s “Six Thousand Years” (2018). He has three works in the show. Credit...Tavares Strachan

The title and concept were especially appealing to the artist Tavares Strachan, who grew up in Nassau in the Bahamas and now lives and works mostly in New York.

“‘Soft power’ is a contradiction in terms,” Mr. Strachan said over the summer, on a brief break from creating new work in his large Chelsea studio. “But yin and yang is a fundamental part of making anything compelling.”

Mr. Strachan, 39, gained attention when he represented the Bahamas in the 2013 Venice Biennale, and he has three artworks in the San Francisco show: “Henrietta” (2014), “The Encyclopedia of Invisibility” (2018) and “Six Thousand Years” (2018).

He said that “Encyclopedia” was the foundation of much of his art making lately. The project, which took several years to complete, is a lavish tome with gilt-edged pages that mixes entries on previously untold histories, written by Mr. Strachan and his collaborators, with standard information from other sources.

One of the new entries, on the [Jamaican D.J. known as Sister Nancy](#), reads in part, “Lives in New Jersey and plans to go back into her music career full time after working as an accountant.”

“We’re revealing a layer of something that’s been obscure or invisible,” Mr. Strachan said. “It’s not meant to replace Britannica. It’s an alternative document.”

Similarly, “Henrietta” takes as its subject Henrietta Lacks, the African-American woman whose cells were used for pioneering medical research, but without her consent. It is a Pyrex sculpture in a vat of clear mineral oil.

“When light passes through it, the form disappears,” Mr. Strachan said.

He said that after growing up in the Bahamas, he moved away, and only upon going back to visit much later was he able to see some of the power dynamics at play there.

“A lot of the politics are hidden,” Mr. Strachan said. “The Bahamas had a peaceful transition in the post-colonial era, but the attitude of the powerful was to just control things from an economic standpoint.”

He added: “I’ve lived it, but it was hard to see at first. So I’ve developed a fascination with things that aren’t on the surface.”

He said he appreciated that in organizing the show, Ms. Joo knew exactly what she wanted.

“The job of the curator and the artist is to push each other, and she has a strong vision,” he added.



The artist Xaviera Simmons with “The Whole United States Is Southern” in her Long Island City, N.Y., studio. Credit...Mark Elzey Jr for The New York Times

For her contribution to the show, the New York-based artist Xaviera Simmons is showing an assemblage of about 150 color-blocked panels with text.

One of the panels reads: “Angry white mobs intentionally destroyed whole Negro towns.”

The work’s palette is inspired by that of the African-American artist Jacob Lawrence’s well-known [Great Migration series](#).

“I grew up in New York going to MoMA and seeing that series as a kid,” Ms. Simmons said of the Museum of Modern Art in New

York. “It’s part of my language as an artist.”

New Yorkers had a chance to see her work recently, when her piece “Convene” was installed at Hunters Point South Park in Long Island City over the summer. It was composed of overturned aluminum canoes painted to evoke various national flags.

Ms. Simmons said that the San Francisco show’s theme resonated for her: “Our lives are dictated by soft power — traditional media, social media are part of how we build democracy.”



A scene from a video of a rehearsal for Tanya Lukin Linklater's "An Amplification Through Many Minds." Credit...Tanya Lukin; Photo: Neven Lohead

The artist Tanya Lukin Linklater, who grew up in Alaska and now lives and works in North Bay, Ontario, has two works in the exhibition,

including a 2017 video called "The Treaty Is in the Body."

"Treaty" deals with "the transmission of sacred knowledge" among indigenous people, Ms. Linklater said. It was filmed in her living room, where an Omaskeko Cree [knowledge keeper](#) talks to a group of women, and at a nearby school, where a Maliseet dancer performed.

The video is silent. "They retain a kind of opacity," she said of the interactions. "The audience may not have a context for the knowledge."

The thrust of the piece, she said, is that "learning continues, despite centuries of colonial violence."

Her other work in "Soft Power," a commission, was a collaboration with the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, Calif. For "An Amplification Through Many Minds," she filmed dancers in an off-site storage area of the museum. The action centers on artifacts from Kodiak Island, Alaska, where Ms. Linklater was raised.

"My island has a difficult and violent history," she said, adding that the performance was a "gesture toward repatriation."

In another era, that may have not been embraced by a museum like the Hearst, but Ms. Linklater said the institution had been receptive and welcoming.

She did not shrink from asking the hard questions, or from working for months on the two pieces.

Ms. Joo said that in her experience as a curator, that was a reassuring constant: "The surprise is always how far artists are willing to go."