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“Greater New York” Is a Bellwether—And It’s Time for Critics to Eat Their Words

By Julie Baumgardner

“Youth-besotted,” “a pineapple ice cream soda,” and “a flashpoint” aren’t exactly descriptors that encourage reverence. And “Greater New York,” MoMA PS1’s quinquennial survey of emerging New York-based artists (which unveils for the fourth time this Sunday) hasn’t exactly inspired a legion of critical camaraderie. Nor has it inspired much curatorial approval. Ironically, it was none other than Peter Eleey, the chief curator of this year’s show, who 10 years ago described it as a “flashpoint” in a Frieze Magazine review. Yet looking through the past exhibitions’ rosters, from 2000, 2005, and 2010, the majority of the participants were featured at a crucial moment in their careers, a moment when they either blasted off or faded into obscurity. And most blasted off.

Featured in the inaugural 2000 “Greater New York,” Do Ho Suh exhibited with Lehmann Maupin in September of that year, and has remained with the gallery ever since—not to mention being labelled the “Art Innovator of the Year” in 2013 by the Wall Street Journal. That same year, Shirin Neshat peeled back the New York art world’s provincial bias against Middle Eastern art (in her case, photography), as did Ghada Amer, whose sexually charged paintings would find their way into Gagosian’s hands.

Five years later, the cards were stacked similarly with Carol Bove. That year’s show also included then-rising artists Wangechi Mutu, Paul Chan, and Dana Schutz, who in 10 years time have won legions of awards and major institutional surveys.

The last go-round was anything but amiss, too. Hank Willis Thomas? You’ve heard of him. And Ryan McNamara, Rashaad Newsome, Darren Bader, and LaToya Ruby Frazier—who also just won a MacArthur Genius Grant. Yet the prevailing critical view is resoundingly scathing. As Village Voice critic Christian Viveros-Faune once spouted, “I am reminded of the words of Samuel Johnson: ‘There is nothing uglier than that on the verge of beauty.’” But beauty—and, really, self-actualization—isn’t necessarily the point of these sorts of surveys, even if this one’s title locates it in aesthetic greatness.

How can a show that helped to launch so many careers be so divisive? So much so, it seems, that the forthcoming edition has changed its focus by “bringing together emerging and more established artists,” as the official statement goes. It continues on to explain that “the city itself is being reshaped by a voracious real estate market that poses particular challenges to local artists,” calling for us to “[examine] points of connection and tension between our desire for the new and nostalgia for that which it displaces.”

In 2015, newcomers like M. Lamar and C. Spencer Yeh will be placed in context with Kiki Smith and Gordon Matta-Clark. Skeptics will doubtlessly cry cowardliness. But what do the artists of past editions and those who’ve snapped them up since their debuts at “Greater New York” think? “Critics are allowed to say what they wish, and they always will. It does not—and could never—be the definitive opinion on whether or not the original curatorial intentions are successful,” says Kat Parker, director of Petzel Gallery, which represents Schutz, as well as other GNY alums Yael Bartana and Adam McEwen (who is also reprised for this year).

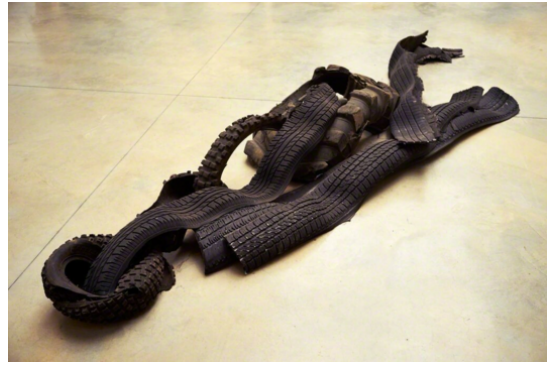
There’s often a schism between critical and market reception. But “‘Greater New York’ functions, as Roberta Smith put it, as a big-ring circus,” quips Fabienne Stephan, a curator at Salon 94, which shows Jimmy DeSana—another featured in this year’s show. “I get to watch and concentrate on an act and delve in if I want to. I do look to spot talent in the show.” The gallery brought on David Benjamin Sherry after his trippy photographic

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self-portrait and landscape series exhibited in the 2010 edition. “That’s where I first was impressed by Huma Bhabha,” says Stephan. “The piece she had in the show, *Untitled* (2005), was then reinstalled in her solo exhibition at PSI three years ago and she is participating in ‘Greater New York’ again this year, 10 years later.”



Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2005



Huma Bhabha, *Atlas* (Installation view), 2015

The expanded criteria for 2015’s installment—mid-career, established, and previously exhibited artists—may seem to belie the pathos of the exhibition. After all, it is, as Parker says, “always viewed as a platform for younger, largely unknown artists.” However, as Thomas says, “survey shows have their place. They revitalize energy within the art world and they take a pulse of the time.” And in the New York area, with some 140,000 practicing artists living within its five boroughs, whose median age is 38, suffice to say that many artists here aren’t exactly spring chickens.

Perhaps the “pulse of the time” is no longer so youth-focused. And “emerging,” as institutional or collecting nomenclature, may be somewhat irrelevant. As Parker puts it: “In today’s day and age, digital media has made it virtually impossible to be unknown.” Likewise, New York harbors immense talent, often much of it overlooked and under-exhibited. Digging deeper—not broader—into its landscape may actually enable “Greater New York” to shed some of its flash-in-the-pan reputation.

Bruce High Quality Foundation (BHQF)—a playful, punky collective that heavily integrates education into their artmaking—exhibited at PSI in 2010 with a moveable participatory installation that “allowed students from the greater New York area to swap used pedestals for new ones,” as the group describes. “We wanted to see if we could redirect a small production budget into a more intimate relationship with other young artists.” Perhaps that’s the conversation the New York art world needs right now. Not reiterating the perpetual gripes of the rising rents or unbalanced demographics, but creating continuity and connections in a multi-generational artistic community. BHQF were excited to hear that, this year, their former professor Robert Bordo is including paintings in “Greater New York.” “He’s a painter a lot of painters know and look at deeply, but his work doesn’t have the broad audience that it deserves,” they say. “So if ‘Greater New York’ gives this work a wider platform, it’s good for everyone.”

While PSI and MoMA have lately been reviled for their corporate pockets and distracting celebrity-chasing curatorial strategy, the artists seem not to care. “I was more excited about the relationship of my work to viewers and audiences than I was thinking about my career, which probably wasn’t the smartest move on my part,” laughs Thomas. For all the drama “Greater New York” has engendered, it’s guaranteed to garner a large audience for its current roster, which looks promising.

“The New York art scene is so large and fractured, I don’t think one museum exhibition could ever accurately represent it entirely,” Parker says, “but from the list of artists included it seems that it is reflective of work made in New York over a specific time period and which may reveal itself to be more contemporary than we anticipate.” To quote Samuel Johnson, “The future is purchased by the present.”