

MUSEUMS/VISUAL ARTS

All together now: A new biennial in Elmhurst



LORI WAXMAN

If you missed an acclaimed show by a local artist last year, fret not. Under the guise of its inaugural biennial, the Elmhurst Art Museum has gathered together a greatest hits exhibition with recent work by 19 of Chicago's of-the-moment creators. The youngest is 29, the oldest 61. Some are familiar, some unknown. Born as far away as Tanzania, most went to art schools here, at least half teach at one of those institutions, a handful run their own exhibition spaces, and only three are represented by commercial galleries. That's a fairly representative cross-section of Chicago artists today.

Faheem Majeed cuts up a real-estate billboard, Tom Burtonwood and Holly Holmes use a 3-D printer to replicate donated objects, Maria Gaspar broadcasts personal stories about the Cook County Jail, Matt Morris queers the wall labels. According to Staci Boris, the museum's chief curator and the show's organizer, what unites them, Cheryl Pope, Doug Fogelson and the rest of their cohort is that they have something to say. Hence the biennial's title, "Chicago Statements," and the heartfelt heft of so much of the work on display.

The weightiest artworks are also some of the most visually seductive. Jenny Kendler pleads for endangered species like the comet hummingbird and the white cockatoo by enhancing them with glittery deflectors and gold-leafed helmets. Alison Ruttan's porcelain sculptures, glowing with pale glazes as refined as Korean royal wares, replicate in miniature four bombed-out buildings in Beirut. Photographs of brilliantly hued houses in snowy

landscapes by Amanda Williams document her project of highlighting — in culturally potent colors like Harold's Chicken Shack red — neglected property in black neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side.

Billy McGuinness hangs two paintings, monochromatic gray expanses that recall desert landscapes or aerial maps, and wouldn't look out of place between a Rothko and a Pollock. Except that McGuinness didn't put paint to canvas to create his dappled color fields. He put canvas to floor — one on the ramp leading to a Wicker Park soup kitchen, the other on the ground of a West Side homeless shelter. There they sat for months, accumulating wear and stains, inventing a new kind of expression through abstraction, collaboration and direct action.

Ugly subjects like homelessness, racism, war and ecological threat benefit from beautiful treatment, provided that treatment is as complex as its subject. Matthew Hoffman's ubiquitous "you are beautiful" billboards — on the museum exterior, on Lake Shore Drive by the Oakwood Boulevard exit, and elsewhere — simplify to the point of indignity. Bereft of irony, Hoffman's notices, begun as a sticker campaign a decade ago and now distributed worldwide in 81 languages, aren't anything but glorified smiley faces. The late Cindy Loehr's "don't give up" magnets did this with empathy and grace. Even Nike's "do it" advertisements have done it better.

For devoted viewers who make it to every gallery show in the greater Chicago area, seeing exceptional work again can only be a boon. Good art profits from repeated viewing. Most recently seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, John

Preus' resuscitated furniture and swings, built of desks and chairs salvaged from shuttered CPS schools, well deserve the picturesque vista out the museum atrium that is temporarily theirs. Edra Soto's "Tropicalamerican" flags, seen this past summer in the Terrain Biennial, billow in the breeze of a bright red fan, their stars and stripes patterned from tropical leaves in an elegant hybridization of the artist's Puerto Rican, American and Chicago allegiances.

New contexts — courtesy location or adjacent artworks — also offer new insights.

Lise Haller Baggesen's takeover of McCormick House, the 1952 Mies van der Rohe-designed home attached to the museum, makes a convincing case for the feminist practitioners of high modernism. Baggesen's "Motherism" tent, banners, rugs, disco ball and beanbags — renamed "Hi(gh) Motherism" at the biennial, previously pitched at the Glass Curtain Gallery and The Poor Farm — tint the residence rose and fill its window-walls with drippy target paintings. Think targets should be crisp and painted only by Jasper Johns or Kenneth Noland? Nearby hovers a 1916 lithograph of concentric circles by the pioneering modernist designer Sonia Delaunay.

Ruttan's bombed-out buildings, originally shown at the Cultural Center, and Williams' colored houses, featured in the Architecture Biennial, share a room with Aram Han Sifuentes' collection of samplers hand-sewn by non-U.S. citizens living and working in the U.S. Made in workshops conducted by the artist, each sampler embroiders one of the 100 questions and answers on the U.S. citizenship

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test, personalized with colored thread, beads and ribbons. Ruttan's war zone adds to these aspirational acts the desperation of refugees, while Williams' South Side reality acknowledges the troubles of the place aspired to. Together, Ruttan and

Williams articulate the place of architecture in the impoverishment of life.

In the next gallery, Kirsten Leenaars displays trenchant drawings of protest signs from the Black Lives Matter movement and screens a video of Washington, D.C., residents performing stirring new protest songs for today. Leenaars is an accomplished aesthete of what matters. Everyone gains from the proximity.

Closeness can challenge, too. In a narrow gallery painted light gray — throughout the show walls shade from black to white, advantageous for displaying art and subtexts — Jesse Howard's high-pressure charcoals of black male protesters face off against Christopher Meerdo's weird hacked cellphone images. What could roughed-up men, cigarettes shoved into their nostrils to protect from tear gas, possibly have to say to half-eaten crackers on a Dixie plate, a pair of electric guitars, giraffes necking in the zoo, a cop taking a selfie? The unlikely confrontation produces questions about disenfranchisement, randomness, self-expression and identity.

What needs to be said can be hard to articulate and even harder to hear. For that we have artists like these.

"Elmhurst Art Museum Biennial: Chicago Statements" runs through Feb. 21 at the Elmhurst Art Museum, 150 S. Cottage Hill Avenue, Elmhurst, 630-834-0202, www.elmhurstartmuseum.org.

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JAMES PRINZ PHOTOS

Faheem Majeed cuts up a real-estate billboard to create "If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home By Now," displayed at the Elmhurst Art Museum as part of its inaugural biennial.



Cheryl Pope, whose "Dark Skin vs. Light Skin" banner hangs in the greatest hits exhibition, is one of 19 artists featured in the museum's biennial, titled "Chicago Statements."



Lise Haller Baggesen's "Hi(gh) Motherism" tent — with banners, rug, disco ball and beanbags — is pitched in the Mies van der Rohe-designed McCormick House.



Marla Gaspar's "Cook County Jail: The Visible and Invisible," an audio documentary of personal stories about the jail, is on headphones at a table in the 1952 Mies structure.