

MoMA PS1's Multi-Generational "Greater New York" Is as Flawed as It Is Successful

BY TESS THACKARA OCTOBER 12, 2015

"Humble" was one of the words that surfaced during a curator discussion on Friday October 9th at a press conference to launch the fourth edition of MoMA PS1's "Greater New York," a quinquennial survey of artwork made in New York that has generated more than its fair share of controversy during past editions. It's a fitting word for a show that is often sober, understated, and uneven in a way typical for surveys of its scope; which not only showcases rising art stars of a younger generation but also reflects back on the lesser-known histories of New York art (from PS1's beginnings in the '70s onwards); and in which there are no noisy spectacles and few participatory installations. This fourth "Greater New York" is heavy on photography, in large part due to the inclusion of esteemed septuagenarian critic Douglas Crimp on its curatorial team.

The influence of Crimp's 2010 exhibition "Mixed Use, Manhattan," curated jointly with Lynne Cooke at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, is felt palpably in the numerous references to the way artists of '70s New York and onwards engaged with the city's post-industrial spaces. James Nares's *Pendulum* (1976), a black-and-white super-8 film showing New York streets as seen from a swinging wrecking ball—blown up to massive scale on a wall inside PS1—sets the tone. Like a giant metronome, it evokes the city's constantly shifting landscape and time experienced as a flux of destruction and regrowth. Also on view is the largest-ever-shown grouping of Alvin Baltrop's series of small, tight photographs documenting the gay community's colonization of the west-side piers for cruising. Nude male figures are seen sunbathing or engaged in various states of intercourse and bondage amid the cracked panes and dilapidated walls of the derelict piers.

Another throwback to the New York of a bygone era, documentary images of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Doors Through and Through* (1976)—an architectural intervention into PS1's first-ever exhibition, "Rooms," in which the artist cut three rectangular spaces into all three floors of the museum, creating a visual through-line—are positioned on all three floors as ghosts of the former holes. "Greater New York" 2015 also captures snapshots of later decades of the 20th century, many serving as heavy reminders of lives wiped out during the Culture Wars of that era. A room filled with monochrome grey-blue skies by Donald Moffett (of *Gran Fury*), Robert Bordo's spare paintings of a coiled telephone wire and blank speech bubbles (both from the '90s), and fierce pussy's more recent wallpaper piece meditating on the AIDS crisis, is so bleak it hurts.

Amid this nostalgia and invocations of loss, the fairy tale at the heart of Sergei Tcherepnin's *Pied Piper Part II: Ringing Rocks* (2013), an approximation of a cave in metal, wood, and burlap, surrounded by a few copper figures of rats, takes on a particular poignancy. Across from Glenn Ligon's text vignettes of the various neighborhoods and homes he's lived in during a lifetime in New York (a tale of housing projects, urban decline, shoebox-sized New York apartments, condemned houses, flooding, and steep rents), Tcherepnin's piece reads like a poetic portal for all the disaffected New York youths of eras past and present.

There are several moments in "Greater New York," like this one, where newer works are enriched by older ones, and vice versa. This is particularly true of the upper floors, which generally provide some levity and feel more tightly curated. Mira Dancy's gorgeous, joyful mural of a reclining female nude, for instance, takes off across from the ecstasy of feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson's *Woman Rising* (1973), a black-and-white photograph in which a woman stands in an open desert, her arms stretched out toward the sky in a gesture of empowerment and freedom that is reinforced by a V-shaped line of contrails in the sky. So too with certain juxtapositions of emerging artists. Nancy Shaver and Sara Cwynar work well side-by-side, with Shaver's poetic assemblages of reused objects channeling perfectly into Cwynar's glitchy renderings of retro imagery.

The structure of the city and the human body are evoked throughout, the latter in a beautiful, light-flooded room dedicated to sculptures of the human form. Here, figures by Kiki Smith, Ugo Rondinone, John Ahearn, Huma Bhabha, Simone Leigh, and numerous others invoke the diverse makeup and experience contained within the borders of the New York area. Elsewhere, the lines and palimpsest-like materiality of the city are present in works by Amy Brener and Nick Relph, and offset by the abstractions of Barry Le Va. And Lebbeus Woods's brilliant sci-fi drawings resonate (despite placement on separate galleries) with Loretta Fahrenholz's dystopic nighttime dance video *Ditch Plains* (2013), shot in East New York and the Rockaways following Hurricane Sandy.

As is the case with all surveys (and especially so for those curated by a team of four, spanning several generations), much of "Greater New York"'s fourth iteration feels pretty disjointed. There are no easy takeaways here, and I often wondered if I could see our current day New York in all of this at all. (Where's all the politics, the consumption, and the ever-encroaching pervasiveness of the digital realm?) "It was important for us not to make a diagnostic show about New York," said Eely. And indeed it avoids asserting any stable positions. But now—when overlooked artists from the '60s and '70s are being surfaced by the market with some regularity—is an apt moment to look back to earlier decades in New York. That breadth of focus taps into a prevalent nostalgia for grittier times when being an artist and having money was something of an oxymoron, and when swathes of Manhattan were ripe for creative use—if more dangerous and unkempt.

While those looking for a singular curatorial vision are in for a gross disappointment, there is an insistence on plurality here that well serves a broad survey. At times, while making a path through the 2015 edition of "Greater New York," one feels lost. But much like the experience of existing in a complex and often overwhelming metropolis, just when you lose your way, something emerges that feels clear, familiar—something you can grab hold of. So it was, for me, with a knockout room on the third floor consisting of a lustrous, glinting textile by Howardena Pindell across from the lucid, soulful paintings of John Finneran, and flanked by Joyce Robins's spotted ceramic dishes and Stefanie Victor's elegant, nuanced metal forms. Together they're a celebration of texture, color, space, and shape, and a tribute to the diverse heritages and aesthetics encapsulated within New York's great span.