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New Art in New Jersey



by Sharon Adarlo

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Installation view, 'Ready or Not — New Jersey Arts Annual' (all images courtesy Newark Museum)

NEWARK — New Jersey's image is calcified with tired cultural signifiers. It's old hat. So it was lovely to encounter the Newark Museum's latest exhibition, [*Ready or Not: 2014 New Jersey Arts Annual*](#), a show displaying works by 40 contemporary artists based in the state. Ranging in different stages in their careers and hailing from locales such as Jersey City and points far south, the annual survey gives the visitors a fresh angle to regard

the Garden State and the current condition of art making in the shadow of New York City.

The show was organized by Shlomit Dror, consulting curator of American Art at the Newark Museum, and juried both by Dror and Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, curator at El Museo del Barrio. The show consists of different installations, sculptures, two-dimensional works, and other forms. Overall, you get a charge from the great, buzzing energy of the many pieces selected for the show.



Ariel Efron and Lucas Vickers, "Exit Vestibule South" (2014)

Like many old buildings retrofitted for modern times, the current entrance of the museum is a new addition that includes a cashier and tour guide desk. One of the highlights of the show engages directly with the old entrance of the museum, a heavy metal door that is no longer used. "Exit Vestibule South," a piece by Ariel Efron and Lucas Vickers, is a lovely and imaginative installation that imbues the old entrance with the majesty it once had by using lights and music.

You enter through a glass revolving door and come inside a dark space that leads to the old entrance. As you step down, your movement triggers soaring electronic music and

the projected image of doors opening up to you. A shower of light follows with each step. The old door itself has a gap between the two leaves that lets in a crack of light from outside, which seems to have informed the artists' approach. The piece is clever, emotive and beautiful.

Another standout in the show includes up close portraits of six people's different braided/cornrow hairstyles. I thought at first So Yoon Lym's "Diosndey, Angel, Angel II, Angel III, Juan II" were photographs. But up close, the tightly woven bands of hair revealed themselves to be made up of acrylic brush strokes on paper. You don't see the person's face, but a sliver of a profile if the view is taken straight down as seen in three of the pictures. Three of the images also depict the back of people's heads.

Not only are the paintings a visual delight but they subtly subvert the perceived negative imagery of braids and cornrows as subaltern and elevate them to worthy art objects deserving of respect and admiration. The different hair styles are arrayed in striking patterns and geometries. Each crown of head is as unique as a thumbprint.



So Yoon Lym, "Diosndey, Angel, Angel II, Angel III, Juan II" (2014)

In an upstairs portion of the exhibit, you can see Jose Anico's "Myth of Triumph," a triptych of images depicted in charcoal on paper. One image portrays what looks like bread hanging from a noose. Next to it, the middle drawing is an aerial shot of a war scene as seen from the cockpit of a fighter plane. Black smoke drifts over a city grid. Overlaid the whole image are red crosshairs. The third picture on the right looks to be military camo clothing also hanging from a noose.

The technique of the drawing is well done. There is a grainy, velvety quality to the images due to the artist taking full advantage of the heavy toothed paper and the softness of charcoal he uses. And as America tries to wind down from its military excursions in the Middle East, there is a subtle sadness and fragility to the images. Its quiet commentary on war and its futility is elegant and understated. Every delicate stroke of charcoal is limned with melancholy.



Jose Anico, "Myth of Triumph" (2014)

The last piece I will highlight is my favorite, and it is the first installation that people will encounter. Painted on parachute cloth and spanning a large corner of the museum's central hall, the mural by LNY, Mata Ruda, and NDA is a beautifully rendered Valentine to Newark, a city equally maligned and iconized.

The mural, "Imaginative Realism," shows landmarks and notable faces from the city in a delightful mashup/collage. The bottom stratum is a map of the city interlaced with different images such as the Orientalist bust of a woman. In the middle, architectural landmarks in front of a blue sky scrolls across the mural — punctuated by the partial, frontal view of a black man, who spans almost the height of the mural in one area. Where the rest of his face should be is a ghostly crown in white. On his chest, a red sunset/rise. This motif is repeated again but in a larger size in another part of the mural. The larger sunset/rise portal is clever. It echoes an existing archway behind the mural. The top strata consists of an ornate cornice and circular cutouts

with phases of the moon and faces of notable people in Newark's history on the other side.



LNY, Mata Ruda, and NDA, "Imaginative Realism" (2014)

I love it. I live in Newark and it's a fun game to point out landmarks I know well. And the mural is expertly painted and its elements merge well into a pleasing whole. It also raises questions about the past, present and future of the city, which is continuously lurching towards progress with every new building or regressing with each budget cut or sensational murder. Like the phases of the moon shown in the mural, the city's fortunes have waxed and waned. And the faces of the portraits reflect the city's different phases. There is inventor Seth Boyden, who lived in the city in the 19th century. There is Kenneth Gibson, the first black mayor of Newark — let alone of a big Northeastern city. Amiri Baraka, firebrand and poet. And there is Jackie Cruz, a curator and community fixture who works at a local gallery, City Without Walls.

The mural begs the visitor to take another look at Newark — the same way the museum's show pulls back the curtain on what's going in New York City's backyard.

Ready or Not: 2014 New Jersey Arts Annual *continues at the Newark Museum (49 Washington St, Newark) through September 7.*

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