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Artifacts | The Loveable 'Ungovernables'

By [LINDA YABLONSKY](#)



The New Museum is calling its second triennial of international art “The Ungovernables.” The attractive young artists at the show’s Valentine’s Day opening suggested a different title: “The Adorables.”

Their eager faces belied whatever sense of anarchy might have inspired their work, and anyone in the crowd of 1,500 hoping for an uprising had to settle for making discoveries instead.

For English speakers, the artists’ names alone twisted many tongues. (Try saying Pratchaya Phinthong, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Hu Xiaoyuan in one breath.) Only three — the New Yorkers Julia Dault and Abigail DeVille, and the Los Angeles-based Wu Tsang — are American-born. The rest, who number about 50 (including several collectives), came from just about everywhere in the Middle East, Europe, Asia and Latin America, and all grew up after the national independence movements and social revolutions of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Most engage with the world the way it is now: fragmentary, complicated, driven by social media and definitely by fashion. At the opening, DeVille was one of several artists dressed in bold prints. Yiadom-Boakye had shimmied into a strapless red sheath and Dault shone in black vinyl, while Wu Tsang looked fetching in a white, off-the-shoulder number. The New Museum

director, Lisa Phillips, chose a black leather jacket over a long yellow skirt by Joe Fresh, the Canadian retailer who is sponsoring the exhibition.

The fourth floor had the show-stoppers. The Vietnamese-born artist Danh Vo fabricated full-scale parts of the Statue of Liberty in copper, the same material that was used in the real one in New York Harbor. Adrián Villar Rojas, a 31-year-old from Argentina, was dwarfed by the monumental, industrial-looking structure that he made on site from Styrofoam and unfired clay. It looked like plumbing for a race of giants from some other world, ancient or future.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” said Jose Kuri, his dealer in Mexico City. “We need more of that in the art world.” The kind of thing that isn’t for sale, he meant. “It’s a suicidal object,” Rojas said, pointing to its already crumbling surface. When the show closes, it will go into the trash.

Detritus is the subject of “All This Is Here,” a video by the Brazilian artist Cinthea Marcelle. It perfectly captures the bleak comedy of vented frustration. Seen from above, its actors are a houseful of objects being catapulted into a street by unseen hands — perhaps those of a mad clutter queen, or someone fed up with her relationship. It was obvious that everyone watching could relate.

Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon and Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, whose much less disposable work commands big prices, were among the art stars prowling the floors with hunter-gatherer dealers, collectors, and curators from other institutions in search of new talent.

“I tripped over the pile the money,” said one young thing who didn’t realize that Phinthong’s welcome mat of worthless Zimbabwean bank notes was there to question the value we put on art. The surveillance-obsessed Amalia Pica, a Londoner from Argentina, posed for photographs before the two circles of light that comprise her projected Venn diagram, but seemed proudest of the collection of colored drinking glasses that she had glued across a fourth-floor wall.

As the museum filled up with people, it became harder to see the art. Some resorted to asking others what they thought of the show, unwilling or unable to make a commitment until the reviews were in. Many took time out on the exhibition’s “magic carpet” — a flying wedge of an exaggerated prayer rug set over blue neon light by the Eurasian Slavs and Tatars collective, at least one of whom held court nearby.

I found much to engage with in the show, including the Egyptian artist Iman Issa’s smart tabletop monuments to popular, if usually unexpressed, sentiments. “Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people,” said one commemorative title for two white globe lamps. But most of “The Ungovernables” was really just unmanageable at a jam-packed opening, where Minam Apang’s fascinating, large-scale drawings were among the works too complex to take in at a glance.

I know people who have no patience for art that doesn’t tell you what you need to know the minute you see it. While no one wants to be told how to read an artwork, those who didn’t take the time to read the brief wall texts provided by curator Eungie Joo missed much of the cultural context here.

Where the artists really let loose was at the after-party that the museum held at the Top of the Standard. Walker was among those stomping at the impromptu dance party by the bar. She didn't have to wait for any reviews of the show. "It made me want to make more art," she said. "First time that's happened at a museum in a while."

Upstairs, in the smoking room, Joo said she'd logged thousands of miles over the last year and a half in search of artists for her show. To put it together, she said, "I tried to follow what I always thought: the New Museum was a place that is safe for taking risks."

Back downstairs, however, no danger lurked. DJs D'marquesina gave way to a live set by the Hot Sardines, a quintet that played catchy postwar jazz and was fronted by a tap dancer and a vocalist in period dress. Never has the Boom Boom Room seemed more like the Rainbow Room. At 1 a.m., the party gave way to the hotel's Valentine's Day attraction: the stripper Dita Von Teese, who climbed into a big martini glass festooned with rhinestones and channeled old Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand routines. They were as tasteful, and chaste, as "The Ungovernables."

Perhaps the revolution will be televised after all.

"The Ungovernables" continues through April 22 at [The New Museum](#), 235 Bowery.