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inside the new museum's 'the ungovernables'



The New Museum's second Triennial exhibition, "The Ungovernables," is an impressive curatorial feat that presents thirty-four international artists born between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. The exhibition's curator, Eungie Joo, frames the exhibition as a paradigm of revolutionary youth culture, tying together diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, and varying aesthetics, within a framework of anti-colonialism and revolutionary movements — perhaps too intent on presenting a thematically unified exhibition.

Regardless of the questionable accuracy and pointed branding of its curatorial vision, the show is highly successful. Joo and the exhibition triumph because of the diversity of the artworks on display and the wide breadth of media dispersed throughout the galleries.

Standout works include Danh Võ's "We Are The People" (*pictured below*), composed of fragmented, disassembled copper panels from of a full-scale replica of the skin of the Statue of Liberty.



Benoit Pailley/Courtesy of the New Museum

Hassan Khan's video, "Jewel" (*pictured below*), is another pleasant surprise. The looping video, installed in a central viewing room dividing the exhibition hall, fills the air with the pulsating sounds of Shaabi music composed by the artist. In the projection, two men dance facing one another, replicating a scene witnessed by the artist in the streets of Cairo to illustrate contemporary power structures in vernacular forms. The work is hypnotic, witty, powerful and understated, and is easily the most enjoyable piece in the show.



Benoit Pailley/Courtesy of the New Museum

Another striking video-based artwork, "The Trainee," by Pilvi Takala (*pictured below*), documents an immersive performance by the artist. Working as a marketing trainee at the professional services giant Deloitte, the artist performs clever social experiments, secretly recording her exploits. One video shows her riding an elevator for a day and the attempts by her coworkers to understand what she is doing.



Benoit Pailley/Courtesy of the New Museum

[Jose Antonio Vega Macotela's](#) multimedia “[Time Exchange](#)” works are also exceptional. The work is a long-term project conducted with inmates at the Santa Martha Acatila Prison in Mexico City. Speaking to social structures and modes of exchange, the project involves the artist exchanging his time with inmates. Vega Macotela takes the place of inmates in the outside world for a designated amount of time, while in exchange prisoners engage in tasks instructed by the artist. Vega Macotela’s pieces show an obsession with material objects that trace human activities.

Artworks in the installation include torn pieces of cloth preserved in wax. In exchange for Vega Macotela waiting for a blonde woman each Monday at 1 p.m. in a specific place in Mexico City, one prisoner, “El Guero” waited in the hallway where the prisoners who were about to be freed passed through in order to steal a piece of clothing from each one. He then had to dip each item in wax in order to maintain the essence of the cloth. Equally as intriguing are bags of “undisclosed contents” (*pictured below*) collected to map the flow of 1000 pesos through the prison, and Veronese’s *The Wedding at Canaan* composed of prison tattoos.



Jennifer Sarathy/ViewFromtheFrontRow.com

While many artworks in “The Ungovernables,” including these examples, can certainly be placed within a social activism framework, to identify them within a pointedly politicized context as the show suggests is to do an injustice to the conceptual, aesthetic, regional, national and personal diversities of the pieces and artists in the exhibition. Luckily, viewers will not be hard pressed to access more subtle themes and underlying contrasts in the exhibition.

The Ungovernables

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Visitors Tip: Don't forget admission to the New Museum is free Thursday nights from 7-9PM!

–Jennifer Sarathy