

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Siddhartha Mitter, "At the BRIC Biennial, Dozens of Local Artists Shine a Light on Brooklyn,"
The Village Voice, November 23, 2016



At the BRIC Biennial, Dozens of Local Artists Shine a Light on Brooklyn

by SIDDHARTHA MITTER

November 23, 2016



Aaron Gilbert, Citibank, 2016

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Started in 2014, the BRIC Biennial has quickly found its niche in the city's art scene: a high-quality showcase of Brooklyn artists that's actually held in the borough, closer than Manhattan galleries and fairs and more focused than the chaos of open studios. This fall, 47 artists — for this edition, all based in Bedford-Stuyvesant or Crown Heights — are featured at the BRIC House, the nonprofit's hub in Fort Greene, as well as three sites in and near the focus neighborhoods. The show produces a deliberate unease, as the work tells direct and implicit stories about change in these communities, where artists have an ambiguous role: part agents of, and part witnesses to, dislocation — and eventually its victims.

But the work isn't all about gentrification. While making their selections from the hundreds of artists they looked into and met with, BRIC vice president Elizabeth Ferrer and associate curator Jenny Gerow found themes capacious enough to address but not fixate on the issue. The final roster comprises a mix of different origins, including lifelong Brooklynites and recent arrivals. The show at BRIC House, "Affective Bodies," draws (loosely) on affect theory — the idea that our physical behavior in community, in space, has an emotional component. The exhibit at the Weeksville Heritage Center, "The Lived City," gets down to brass tacks: real estate, tenants' rights, erasures. (There's more: A four-artist exhibit, "Translations and Annotations," features at Brooklyn's Central Library, while Crown Heights' FiveMyles hosts performances as well as a December solo show by painter Jonathan Allen.)

So what are we looking at here? At BRIC House, two big sculptural works jump out: A monumental tower of old blue jeans, stuffed and trussed and climbing up a pillar in the center of the gallery, part of a series by the artist Sol'sax, communicates the tragic majesty of labor; an installation by Macon Reed, in the bright colors of a child's room, is full of references to witchcraft and persecution (a well, hanging chains, a fire, a noose). Smaller, and full of delicate grace, are the staged photograph-collage hybrids by Rachelle Mozman: Inspired by women Gauguin painted on a trip to Panama, they restore integrity and context to the exoticized subjects in an intimate, feminist gesture. Three paintings by Aaron Gilbert depicting deliberately ordinary scenes — a man at the bank teller window, a couple in the kitchen seasoning chicken wings — are uncannily tender. A two-channel video work by Ilana Harris-Babou stages the artist and her mother in a faux cooking show that becomes an exploration of the erotics of cooking and food.

In a side room, two artists have work that pairs well, each with a video component featuring altered landscapes. Dressed in a kind of Mylar spacesuit, Jakob Steensen moves onscreen across a frozen and futuristic “virtual ecology,” fenced and barren; a similar Mylar mannequin and backdrop bring the eerie cold into the exhibition space. Opposite, a video by Rachel Frank takes a different journey: An unseen narrator describes time travel into prehistory, while fantastical landscapes and creatures take shape. Nearby, three large, realistic sculptures of bison heads sit on a table, part of Frank’s “rewilding” project, in which performers symbolically bring animals back into the urban ecology.

Concern with our habitat, in these works, tends toward the oneiric; the Brooklyn Hi-Art Machine collaborative brings visitors back to reality with its twelve agitprop prints, under each of which is a stack of tracts for visitors to take. Their curriculum for gentrifiers (“Reject the colonizer mentality,” “Admit your racism,” “Recognize the corrupt housing market is unmanageable for most”) — is not subtle, nor trying to be. Kambui Olujimi’s comment on community change is more wistful: He has made dozens of watercolors, one daily, of Catherine Arline, a late Bed-Stuy activist and neighbor. In 36 shown here, she appears sharp or faded, finely drawn or smudged, sometimes doubled or tripled, to each day’s memory its tone. Elsewhere in the show, Olujimi has installed two doors from Ms. Arline’s house along with a footstool, beaded chains, and walking sticks: a shrine and a reminder of what is lost each time property turns over.

The show at Weeksville — site of Brooklyn’s first free black community — further specifies the material stakes; visitors should see it, despite the less central location, at the edge of Crown Heights and Ocean Hill, and limited viewing hours. It features, for instance, Russell Frederick, who photographs those marginalized by gentrification in Bed-Stuy, and Adama Delphine Fawundu, who shows photo portraits and a documentary about Tivoli Towers, the Mitchell-Lama complex in Crown Heights where she grew up and whose tenants she captures at home and in battle over the building’s prospective sale. A video by Baseera Khan narrates her experience over a decade of jarring change in Crown Heights, from new arrival to self-questioning presence.

Chloe Bass's installation includes empty frames with detailed captions describing Bed-Stuy scenes they might have shown ("The guy biking down Lewis Avenue balancing a 6-foot folding table, smoking a cigarette, and talking on his phone, all while not wearing a helmet"). Olalekan Jeyifous offers digital depictions of a future Bed-Stuy, with tall structures and flying vehicles but streets turned to gardens — utopia or dystopia?

If affect is the Biennial's formal concern, beneath it lurks the question of belonging. More than race or gender, a salient difference among these artists is whether they come from this community, how long they have been in it, and through what gestures and decisions they implicate themselves in it daily. It's a success of the Biennial, especially when its full programming is considered, that it offers more artistic approaches around these issues than any simplistic narrative of urban change can contain.

BRIC Biennial: Volume II, Bed-Stuy/Crown Heights Edition
Gallery at BRIC House, 647 Fulton Street, Brooklyn
718-683-5600, bricartsmedia.org
Through January 15