Art

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Review

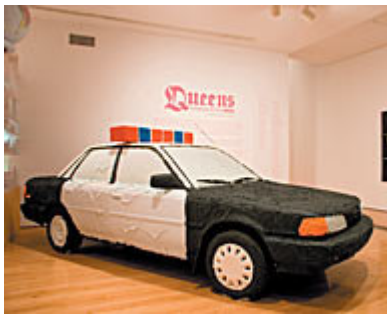
“Queens International: Everything All at Once

Three times isn’t a charm for the Queens biennial.

By Kate Lowenstein

★★★☆☆☆

Queens Museum of Art, through Sun 14



T. Charnan Lewis, *Iced Police Car*
Photograph courtesy The Queens Museum and the artist

Most biennials are organized around heady themes in an attempt to summarize the current state of contemporary art—no mean feat given a global scene that’s growing as rapidly as hedge-fund returns. Bucking that trend is the third “Queens International,” organized by Herb Tam, acting associate curator at the Queens Museum o and Jaishri Abichandani, an artist and the QMA’s director of public projects. The pair base their sho two simple facts: (1) Queens is the site of a burgeoning art community, and (2) its artists, like the borough, are astonishingly diverse. This straightforward approach yields a sprawling exhibition of 5 artists and two collaboratives, all of whom live or work in Queens. While the result is certainly stimu it also has its flaws.

Not the least of these is a lack of focus. The show’s subtitle, “Everything All at Once,” doubles as a description of its organizational structure—or, rather, its lack thereof. Rather than arranging pieces according to subject matter or medium, Tam and Abichandani opt for a disjunction of materials and themes. T. Charnan

Lewis's Toyota Camry, revamped with cake frosting to look like a police car, is parked in front of Jesus Gonzalez Gutierrez's painting of a supplicant prisoner, which abuts Alejandro Almanza Pereda's sculptural still life of household items (plates, water jugs, a chest of drawers) stacked one atop another—a breathtaking image of the tenuousness of domesticity. While it's possible that this juxtaposition is meant as a comment on confinement (be it jail or a tiny apartment), it seems like a stretch.

Arbitrary configurations like this one afford opportunities for free association, but in most instances—Joshua Abram Howard's gold-painted cardboard monkey head planted in front of Paul Galloway's photorealistic rendering of two Mormon men, for example—the disconnects are so jarring as to detract from the work.

Given the diverse nationalities of the show's artists (about a dozen countries are represented), it's surprise that many of them tackle issues of culture clash. Sara Rahbar's work details the experienc being Iranian-American with a mash-up of U.S. references (the Stars and Stripes) and Iranian ones (textiles, for example), presented through collage, photographs and writing; eerie, beautiful ink-on- paintings by Andrew Hur incorporate typewritten text relating stories of horrifying injustices visited u South Koreans by American soldiers; and Judith Barry's video projections document people recour their experiences as immigrants to the U.S. Some artists use their nationality as a muse: Mary A. Valverde's decorative, delicate abstract wire sculpture mimics the folk art from her childhood in Ecu Others take a critical tack, as in Lucia Pizzani's formally graceful assemblage of a glass of water er by a curtain of gold chains, a comment on Venezuela's obsession with mining for precious metals a expense of its water supply.

When the art does sync up thematically, the results can be heavy-handed: A gallery dedicated sole female artists is a bad flashback to last year's Whitney Biennial, which relegated most of its black a to the same floor. In this room, Orly Genger's crocheted climbing ropes and Blanka Amezkua's par embroidered with erotic images of women both pay homage to the craft-intensive feminist art of the 1970s. And while Anita Ragusa's paintings of ladies lounging in jewel-toned interiors and Debra Hampton's faux-tribal headdresses don't make those references directly, it's difficult to avoid readir them into the work.

A selection of muted works several rooms later provides a more satisfyingly coherent environment. Vadera's color photographs are overlaid with veils of acrylic that render the images barely decipher Gwenessa Lam's two oil paintings of windows reveal nothing but emptiness through the panes of g and layered, pale gray canvases by Shen Chen are void of all narrative. The room is an oasis of ca the midst of the multimedia hubbub; it serves as a reminder that some thematic arrangements can a show from overwhelming disarray.

Of the plentiful video work, a smattering is captivating, such as Ian Monforte's clips of real-life apol Sophia Peer's tender yet mocking footage of her retired parents (both of which play into our societa obsession with reality TV) and a beautiful dance piece in which Yin Mei makes Chinese calligraphy bodily affair by transforming her figure into a paintbrush on a massive piece of rice paper, claiming agency for the female form used in a similar manner by Yves Klein 40 years ago.

Such standout moments are too few and far between to rescue the show from incoherence, howev

curators’ thesis (if it can be called that) is simply too broad to be meaningful. The show is a jumble often underwhelming works that have little in common. New York City’s largest and most diverse b deserves a more organized and inspired survey in 2008.