

Knight, Christopher "Art review: The Hammer biennial 'Made in L.A. 2012' succeeds," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2012

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'Made in L.A. 2012' review: The Hammer biennial mixes works by younger artists and more established artists such as Channa Horwitz, Simone Forti and Morgan Fisher.



Cayetano Ferrer, "Untitled," 2012, mixed media with video projection, installation view (Municipal Art Gallery). (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times / June 8, 2012)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

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Timing isn't everything, but it is something, and the timing of the new Hammer Museum biennial couldn't be better.

Having spent much of the last year looking at L.A. art made by post-World War II generations that laid the groundwork for the city's explosive cultural ripening in the 1980s, via the multiple-museum extravaganza that was Pacific Standard Time, now we get a cross-section of recent art made a generation later.

Before, meet after.

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Formally titled "Made in L.A. 2012," the biennial represents a slight shift for the Hammer. Prior invitational surveys have been thematic. For instance, "Thing: New Sculpture From Los Angeles" in 2005 — perhaps the most memorable — looked at a surge in object-sculpture, following an extended period in which room-size installation-sculpture was everywhere. "Made in L.A." has no theme.

The number of artists has also grown. "Thing" had 20, "Made in L.A." has 60.

Hammer curators Anne Ellegood and Ali Subotnick partnered with Lauri Firstenberg, Cesar Garcia and Malik Gaines from LAX Art in Culver City, where the 10th anniversary of a community art workshop by Slanguage Studio (Mario Ybarra Jr. and Karla Diaz) is being documented. (You can't miss the savvy mural on the building facade by the affiliated 777 Crew, which turns a gritty urban landscape into an array of candles both elegiac and celebratory.)

The biennial also spills over into Hollywood's Municipal Art Gallery, where installation and video art are prominent, while a performance series is also unfolding. Then, for the second weekend in July, the Venice Beach boardwalk will become a temporary venue.

The Hammer show also coincides with the Orange County Museum of Art's decision to change its statewide biennial, in operation since 1984, into a triennial. That show, which has its premiere next summer, will encompass California and the Pacific Rim. Changes such as these reflect a welcome responsiveness to changes in the city's art ecology.

My rule of thumb for a successful biennial is wanting to see a third of the work again. That might not sound like much, but the number actually eludes most such shows. The art world is now so large, the works' range so vast, that expecting more invites disappointment. The Hammer's show, where a big chunk of undercooked or derivative art can be ignored, is easily a success.

It has a dual focus that adds a certain freshness: younger artists, most born in the 1970s and early 1980s; plus notable established artists, whose work should be far better known than it is. This second group is the anchor; unsurprisingly, it's where some of the most substantive work will be found.

Channa Horwitz, who has been working since the 1960s, makes patterned Minimalist drawings that breathe, pulsate and visually warp in most un-Minimalist ways. One colored dot follows another on big gridded sheets of graph paper. Systemic logic, which sustains industrial and digital societies, visually pops and fizzes, becoming a bountiful ritual chant.

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Drawings, writings and a reconfigured 1986 performance video by choreographer Simone Forti turn abstract consciousness into bodily knowledge. In the video Forti works her way through a stack of folded newspapers, which she presses flat against her body as if obsessively ironing out the wrinkles with her hands. The Information Age gets embedded in her skin.

A geometric wall painting by Morgan Fisher wraps around a corner and part of the ceiling in an outdoor Hammer corridor. Big red, yellow, blue and green polygons might superficially recall an Ellsworth Kelly, but these skewed shapes instead emphasize jumbled angles on surrounding Westwood buildings. A Kelly snaps the world's chaotic visual patchwork into a coherent whole, while Fisher's sly mural visually pulls architecture apart by the seams.

Roy Dowell, known for paintings and collages, provides the show's big surprise. I've counted the artist as a friend for 25 years but was wholly unprepared for these new painted sculptures. Vivid modern abstraction derived from high art and popular design is fused with functional forms suggestive of tribal objects — headdress, stool, mask, shield and more. Art and its rituals of display are bracingly unveiled as a celebratory branch of global ethnology.

The sculptures are in the show's single most beautiful room, which includes work by two younger artists. Forty small drawings and collages by Scoli Acosta navigate external reality and an interior world, stitching the two together into poetic entries in a ruminative visual diary. The crisp graphic geometries of Brian Sharp's modestly scaled abstract paintings seem to slowly dissolve, like crystals melting in warm water, organic fluidity and chromatic warmth soon overtaking the visual field.

Mimi Lauter's enormous, richly colored pastel drawings are cave paintings of the soul, their densely scratched imagery reading as wild landscapes merged with viscera. Across the room, organic mandalas fusing Eastern and Western motifs unfold within intricately crafted, jewel-toned "tramp frames" painted by Zach Harris.

Three installations that employ video stand out. A viewer sits among Koki Tanaka's suspended mirror-disks to watch and hear two marimba players improvise on their instruments, the slowly spinning reflections magically pushing and pulling perception in and out of infectious musical rhythms. Dan Finsel's eccentric, erotic obsession with an awful sculptural collaboration between New York artist Keith Edmier and late TV icon Farrah Fawcett, shown to lots of publicity at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2000, is weirdly touching — the Pygmalion story as told by Ridley Scott.

Cayetano Ferrer built a vaguely pre-Columbian temple facade as a frame for viewing a flashy floor-collage, pieced together from vibrant Las Vegas casino carpet fragments. The temple's low-relief surface is animated by garish video projections. The seductive

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vulgarity of authoritarian power is at once puckish and perturbing.

So it is in a very different work by the Propeller Group (Phunam Thuc Ha, Matt Lucero and Tuan Andrew Nguyen). In a creepy one-minute television commercial, slick production values try to rebrand failed communist ideology, selling it to a new century. Using capitalism's most powerful medium to achieve this contradictory project ends up illuminating — and irradiating — both.

The lilting commercial's cheerful tag line, "Everyone's welcome," might send you fleeing the room in horror. The Propeller Group is not to be confused with various ad agencies of the same name — or maybe it is, given their cunning approach.

Additional noteworthy works include paintings, installations and mixed-media sculptures by **Kathryn Andrews**, Meg Cranston, Pearl C. Hsiung, Allison Miller, Nicole Miller, Meleko Mokgosi, Ruby Neri, Joel Otterson, Camilo Ontiveros, Ryan Sluggett, Jill Spector and Henry Taylor. Competition should be stiff for the Mohn Award — \$100,000, plus a publication — which will go to one artist in the show.

Unfortunately, a wince-inducing selection gimmick accompanies the magnanimous Mohn gift. A rather parochial jury of outside curators (three from New York, one from L.A.) will choose five finalists, but the audience will then vote the winner. This TV reality-contest process — "Dancing With the Art Stars" — is less about sharp curatorial insight into significant art, which is what one hopes for from art museums, than it is about artists' potential skill at exploiting social media and networking to rouse voters. It's a misstep for an otherwise engaging exhibition.