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LA Weekly, June 13, 2012

LA WEEKLY

Hammer Museum's 'Made in L.A.,' the City's First Biennial, Is a Winner, Despite its Vastness

By Carol Cheh



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Pearl C. Hsiung kills it with *From Above It Is Not Bright, From Below It Is Not Dark*

Following on the heels of *Pacific Standard Time*, *Made in L.A.* refocuses our attention on the present moment by serving as the first installment in an ongoing, biennial survey of contemporary art production in Los Angeles. It's a hugely ambitious undertaking, but at the same time, its execution is tender and homegrown.

Over the last decade or so, biennial exhibitions have become a ubiquitous, and sometimes annoying, component of the global contemporary art landscape. They are typically bloated and/or over-conceived affairs that attempt to survey the art of our time. The granddaddy of them all, the Venice Biennale, features pavilions of art from all

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over the world. The Whitney Biennial attempts to survey American art, and the recently founded Prospect New Orleans mixes a regional focus with international players.

For Los Angeles to do a biennial exhibition focused solely on our own artists is a pretty ballsy statement, showing exuberant faith in the quality and breadth of our city's own art scene. And indeed, it is the artists and their work (as opposed to curatorial swagger or overarching thematic constructs) that are the firm focus of this show. While many large group exhibitions can erode the individuality of the participating artists, "Made in L.A.'s" careful and attentive curation enables each of the 60 artists to show us a substantive slice of their practice. This is the show's greatest strength, turning it into something of a compact and efficient L.A. artist studio tour.



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Art collective Slangue takes over LAXART's gallery in Culver City

Just as geography plays a pervasive role in the life of our city, so too does it physically shape this biennial, which sprawls across three separate venues -- the Hammer Museum in Westwood, LAXART in Culver City and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park. The tone of each space is different, reflecting the shifting tones of L.A.'s neighborhoods. The Hammer has the largest selection of artists and feels the most like a formal museum show. The Barnsdall portion, nestled on a woody hill in

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Hollywood, has a funkier, more open quality. LAXART's small gallery on the street in Culver City functions as a retrospective and laboratory space for Slanguage, a socially engaged collective that focuses on education and community building through art.



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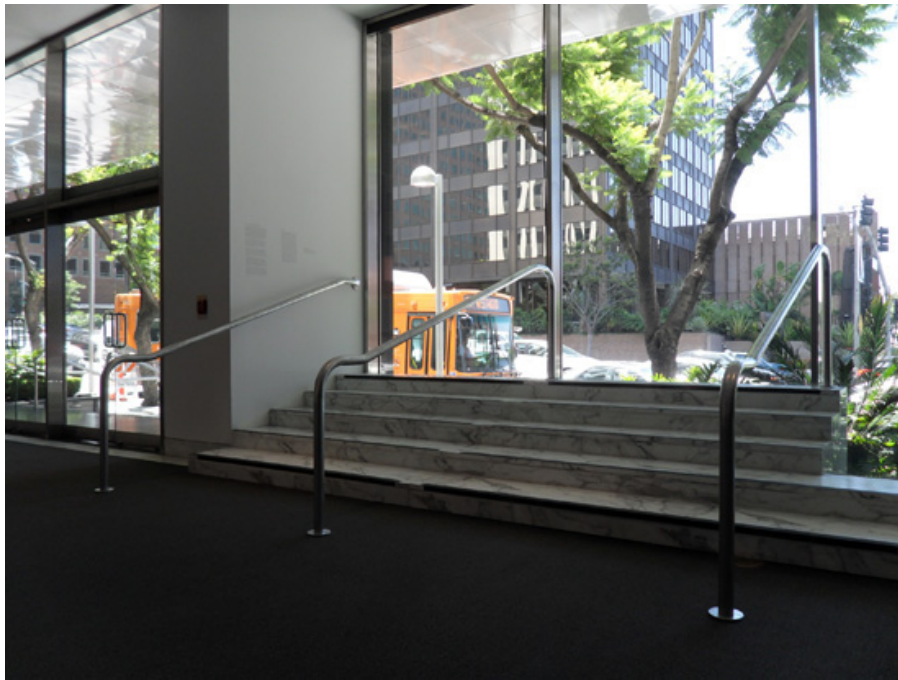
Visitors check out Mark Hagen's *We've Seen the Future and We're Not Going*, at the Hammer opening.

The artwork flows well through all the spaces. Like LAXART, Barnsdall more or less gives each artist a gallery, allowing their artwork to simply breathe. In the Hammer's main galleries, artists are sensitively paired or grouped -- Jill Spector's odd sculptures wrested from human figures confer with Meleko Mokgosi's epic historical paintings, Kate Costello's flippant nude photographic portraits sit with **Kathryn Andrews' sculptural studies of pop culture**, and Analia Saban's drippy experiments with the painted canvas face Channa Horwitz's mathematically generated abstract drawings.

It's nice, too, when artists' works pop up in different locations, as with Mark Hagen's impressive wall-like sculptures, appearing both indoors and out at the Hammer, or when they occupy unusual spaces, as with Fiona Connor's brilliant re-creation of the Hammer's stairs, sitting opposite the actual stairs in the lobby. Artists also appear in one another's work -- Simone Forti was an inspiration for Spector's sculptures, and Math Bass performs in one of Erika Vogt's films. The vast majority of works are by

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young, up-and-coming artists, but there are a handful of nice nods to under-recognized older artists.



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Fiona Connor's Lobbies on Wilshire graces the Hammer's entrance area.



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Koki Tanaka's immersive installation, Beholding Performer, Performing Beholder, blends performer with audience.

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Much has been made of the monetary support that was given to all the participating artists, and indeed, it's nice to see many of them able to realize more ambitious projects than they have in the past. Pearl C. Hsiung's enormous, scaffolded painting *From Above It Is Not Bright, From Below It Is Not Dark*, installed on the Hammer Museum's Lindbrook Terrace, is a great example. Her colorfully exploding paintings and videos have always had a spectacular quality to them, and her vision really gets to shine in this multipaneled work that also utilizes the windowpanes behind it for a rainbow effect. Similarly, Liz Glynn's roomful of dramatic sculptures and stored archaeological objects that can be handled by the viewer brings a more vivid, tactile experience to the themes of trafficking and cultural transformation that she explored in her recent solo show at Pitzer College.



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Jill Spector's We Dance Like Sculpture #1

Appropriate weight seems to be given to each artist. Jill Spector has a strange body of work that explores choreographed figural movement through abstract sculpture. Her untamed assemblages use a clunky assortment of materials to collage visual elements from theater and dance, like a stage and a white hand. It's a bit of a sensual assault, and it's great that the curators have included two of Spector's photographic collages, which served as the basis for the sculptures, to help illuminate their structural logic.

Two artists' installations are real standouts in the exhibition. Miljohn Ruperto's impossibly beautiful and deeply mysterious *Seven and Five* pairs five Chinese-made

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reproductions of Caspar David Friedrich's classic Romantic painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) with seven video monitors showing different takes of Ruperto's remake of "Beta Delta Gamma," an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in which a college prank at a beach party goes awry. This far-seeing work reaches for existential humor and depth, and gets it.



Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles

Miljohn Ruperto's captivating *Seven and Five*

Two artists' installations are real standouts in the exhibition. Miljohn Ruperto's impossibly beautiful and deeply mysterious *Seven and Five* pairs five Chinese-made reproductions of Caspar David Friedrich's classic Romantic painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) with seven video monitors showing different takes of Ruperto's remake of "Beta Delta Gamma," an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in which a college prank at a beach party goes awry. This far-seeing work reaches for existential humor and depth, and gets it.

Cayetano Ferrer's glittery two-room installation exploring the seductions of Vegas was probably the biggest crowd-pleaser in the whole show, garnering the most tweeted photos during the Barnsdall opening. Unlike similar attention-grabbing works at MOCA's wretched Mike D-curated *Transmission L.A.: A/V Club* show last month, however, Ferrer's has both an effortless cool and a spatial/conceptual intelligence that lingers long after one exits its neon glow.

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Cayetano Ferrer hits it out of the park with Quarter-Scale Grand Entrance.



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Visitors contemplate Erika Vogt's spooky videos and objects.

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Due to the sheer volume of "Made in L.A.," it's impossible to like everything that's in it, no matter how well curated it is. Somewhere in the middle of the Hammer portion, I found myself swimming through two or three galleries filled with excess detritus arranged as art, along with some small paintings and sculptures that were remarkably unremarkable. Fatigue and lack of inspiration set in at that point. Some of these works felt included more out of obligation than genuine interest. Still, it's not the point of a show like this to like everything that it has to offer. Rather, the point is to give us a snapshot of artmaking in L.A. at this moment, and to open the door for some public dialogue. In this regard, it does succeed admirably.

There are still performances yet to come on the Hammer's schedule. Rather than having objects in the galleries, Math Bass, Scott Benzel, Simone Forti, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Ashley Hunt, Zac Monday and D'Ette Nogle will be represented by performative works. I'm especially looking forward to Simone Forti's News Animations. At Barnsdall, I found myself riveted to audio recordings of her jazzy readings from her journals, which were captivating in their soaring, exploratory melodies. Forti herself could also be seen dancing at the Hammer's opening party and deeply absorbed in Animal Charm's video collages at the Barnsdall opening. A pioneer of movement and sound works since the 1960s, Forti clearly hasn't lost her curiosity and ability to engage.



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One of Zac Monday's performers hams it up at the Hammer opening.

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Probably the biggest deal about this biennial is that it comes with a hefty award for one lucky artist. The Mohn Award of \$100,000, which is bigger than the Tate Museum's Turner Prize of £40,000 and matches the Whitney Biennial's Bucksbaum Award, puts us on a par with the biggest international players. In a particularly L.A. twist, five finalists will be chosen by a panel of judges, and the public gets to vote on the winner beginning on June 28. Don't forget to register in person at one of the three exhibitions venues for your chance to vote.

Made in L.A. is on view at the Hammer Museum, LAXART, and Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park through September 2. Visit madeinla2012.org for complete details.