

Brian P. Kelly, '2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone Review: What's Old Is New at the New Museum,' *The Wall Street Journal*, November 17 2021

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ART REVIEW

'2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone' Review: What's Old Is New at the New Museum

The global survey of contemporary art has plenty to enjoy but can feel frustratingly beholden to the past



Gabriel Chaile's 'Mama Luchona' (2021), center

PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI/NEW MUSEUM

By Brian P. Kelly

New York

Assessing the state of any art form can be tricky: Cast your net too broadly and grand pronouncements can seem disjointed; limit your scope too much and those pronouncements seem far less than grand. And while annual appraisals are the norm in the domain of popular culture—with Best Of lists, award ceremonies and think pieces that unwind like clockwork at the same times every year—the world of visual art doesn't have the same consensus when it comes to the frequency with which it should take stock of itself. Every few months (the mega fairs that skip from monied metropolis to monied metropolis)? Every two years (the Whitney and Venice biennials being the best-known examples)? Longer still (the Carnegie International and Documenta)?

2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone

New Museum

Through Jan. 23, 2022

The New Museum lands somewhere in the middle, hosting a triennial, whose fifth iteration is titled “Soft Water Hard Stone.” Co-curated by the institution’s Margot Norton and by Jamillah James of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the show features the work of 40 artists and collectives in all variety of media, spread throughout the entire museum; most are exhibiting in a U.S. museum for the first time.

According to the introductory wall text, the title is drawn from a Brazilian proverb: “Soft water on hard stone hits until it bores a hole.” It goes on to explain that “The proverb can be said to have two meanings: if one persists long enough, the desired effect can eventually be achieved; and time can destroy even the most perceptibly solid materials.”



Christina Pataialii's 'Footsteps in the Dark' (2021)

PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI/NEW MUSEUM

These alternatively enduring and Ozymandian outlooks are the fragile threads that knit the show’s incredibly varied—in terms of aesthetics, materials and quality—works together. Christina Pataialii’s paintings (in a show with very few works in traditional media) certainly seem to suggest solidarity if not perseverance, as in “Footsteps in the Dark” (2021), in which a worker’s boot, captured in muted colors with Philip Guston-like exaggeration, stomps down in the middle of the image. And on the Shelley front, Brandon Ndife’s sculptures use cast insulation foam and other materials to depict frightening flora

—hints of gnarled bark and engorged fruit—metastasized to everyday household objects in unsettling visions of postapocalyptic natural reclamation.

And two pieces, one modest and one grand in scale, fit the theme quite literally. Gabriela Mureb’s “Machine #4: stone (ground)” (created in 2017, before the triennial subject was announced) sits on the floor and uses a small motor to hit an actual rock with an aluminum rod, slowly wearing it away. Tomás Díaz Cedeño’s “1000 años” (2019, also pre-announcement) suspends five hefty concrete sculptures, redolent of stalactites, from chains, then pumps water to the top of each, which slowly drips down onto stoneware ceramics below, in theory slowly eroding them—though the process may just take that 1,000 years.



Hera Büyüктаşçıyan’s ‘Nothing Further Beyond’ (2021), foreground, Jeneen Frei Njootli’s ‘Ache’ (2019), rear wall, Rose Salane’s ‘60 Detected Rings (1991-2001)’ (2021), right wall

PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI/NEW MUSEUM

That said, many of the works here seem, at first glance, only tangentially related to the ideas the curators hope to grapple with, though many make their case with wall labels packed with artspeak. (At first I thought Hera Büyüктаşçıyan’s 2021 installation of stacked carpets, “Nothing Further Beyond,” might have been an homage to Joseph Beuys’s stacked felt-and-copper “Fond” series, but instead discovered that the work “emulates the profound compression of narratives present in the ruins” of the Arch of Theodosius, “and foregrounds the tensions hidden within the history”). Still, it would be overly harsh to demand that a sweeping review of global contemporary art be so inflexible in adhering to its theme that it excludes truly great work. The problem with “Soft Water Hard Stone,”

though, is that a good deal of the work here isn't great and some of the more engaging pieces seem overly indebted to great art of the past.

Bronwyn Katz's "Xãe" (2021), a cluster of steel, cardboard and wire totems, is highly tactile. It's also highly reminiscent of Eva Hesse's "Repetition" works, which were made more than a half-century ago. Jeneen Frei Njootli's "Fighting for the title not to be pending" (2020), which scatters the artist's weight in beads in nooks and corners of various galleries, highlights the complicated nature of Indigenous identity (Njootli is Vuntut Gwitchin) by using traditional materials to explore legacies of forced fracture and dispersal. But if Félix González-Torres and his piles of candies come to mind, you're not the only one.



Brandon Ndife, 'Market Fare' (2021)



Ambera Wellmann 'Strobe' (2021)

PHOTOS: DARIO LASAGNI/NEW MUSEUM(5)

There is still plenty worth seeing at the New Museum: Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho's "waves move bile" (2020), a quintet of spectral sculptures about French colonialism—glowing heads modeled after a figure in Louis Botinelly's "Colonies of Asia," flickering entrails dangling beneath them; Nickola Pottinger's colorful, abstract, paper-pulp wall reliefs; Rose Salane's collection of metal-detector-found rings; a different work by Jeneen Frei Njootli: haunting parkas, stiff and rood-like after being dredged through concrete; Angelika Loderer's precisely manufactured hanging sand-and-metal pieces; Ambera Wellmann's monumental painting "Strobe" (2021); and Gabriel Chaile's towering clay "Mamá Luchona" (2021), to name just a few. But at the same time, it is a little disappointing that a show that aims to highlight the global avant-garde seems so frequently fixated on the old guard.