

Holland Cotter, 'New Museum Triennial Explores the Hidden Strengths of Soft Power,' *The New York Times*, November 4 2021

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CRITIC'S PICK

New Museum Triennial Explores the Hidden Strengths of Soft Power

A grab bag of forms and styles, the 2021 Triennial is that rare thing, a big contemporary survey with a cohesive mood.



Installation view of “Soft Water Hard Stone” at the New Museum Triennial, which showcases works by 40 artists and collectives around the world. Foreground, Hera Buyuktasciyan’s “Nothing Further Beyond” (2021), and on the wall, Evgeny Antufiev’s “Untitled” 2021. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



By Holland Cotter

Nov. 4, 2021

The New Museum’s fifth Triennial exhibition, titled “Soft Water Hard Stone,” is largely a product of lockdown. Much of the work by 40 international artists and collectives was made during the past two pandemic-strapped years. And it has, overall, a hoarded, shut-in feel. Colors are muted. Materials are scrappy, unpretty. (Concrete turns up a lot). Scale is generally small, and of the few monumental pieces, most are sculptures or installations in break-downable formats.

Certain themes recur: impermanence, erosion, disease, survival. Political vibes are buzzing everywhere, but are rarely instantly readable as such. The eye-candy suavity found in the heavily marketed current wave of figure painting seen a lot in galleries finds no place here. Nor, for that matter, does any other single “look.” Yet, despite being a grab bag of forms and styles, the 2021 Triennial is that rare thing, a big contemporary survey — it fills three floors of the museum, plus its lobby — with a cohesive texture and mood.

The exhibition’s theme is adapted from a Brazilian proverb “Soft water on hard stone hits until it bores a hole” (“Água mole em pedra dura, tanto bate até que fura”). That piece of pop wisdom — the notion that persistent pressure eventually wears down resistance and creates change — is, of course, a staple of many cultures. And the show supplies a range of visual matches for it.

The most direct and concise of them, a 2017 kinetic sculpture by the Rio de Janeiro-based artist Gabriela Mureb, is just off the elevator on the museum's fourth floor. Titled "Machine #4: Stone (Ground)," it has two components: a plain upright rock, and a motorized metal rod that rhythmically rams the stone's surface. At every blow, the rock tilts slightly backward, then resumes its balance, ready for the next hit. The sound of repeated impact, steady as a heartbeat, sounds through the gallery.

Most of the artists in the show — organized by Margot Norton, a curator at the New Museum, and Jamillah James, senior curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles — take a less literal approach to the dynamic of transformation, focusing their attention on the broader, often less tangible pressures exerted on the world by time, nature and human intervention. And in their work, they demonstrate the many ways art can, through soft-power pressures of its own, add information, shape thinking and prevent loss.

A majestic seven-panel oil painting titled "As I Lay Dying," by the Baltimore-based **Cynthia Daignault**, looks, at a glance, like a straightforward image of trees in a landscape, done in ghostly tones of gray. The trees, however, have a specific identity. They're so-called witness trees, of a kind that have survived in the American South from before the Civil War into the 21st century.



"Mamá Luchona" (2021), a towering clay sculpture by Gabriel Chaile; on the wall, Cynthia Daignault's seven-panel oil painting, "As I Lay Dying," 2021. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

On the one hand, Daignault's arboreal group portrait is a preservative document: In it, the witness trees will live on. But it's also a complex political statement. It's a reminder that, with climate change, the longevity these trees represent may be a thing of the past, and that the national trauma they lived through almost a century and a half ago is still, in fact, alive.

Daignault is one of several artists who use art to chip away at historical lies and silences. A towering clay sculpture by **Gabriel Chaile** is a celebration of the still-living vitality of precolonial Indigenous cultures of his native country of Argentina. In a video by **Tanya Lukin Linklater**, an artist of Native American descent now living in Canada, we accompany her on a tour of Indigenous art locked in storage in an ethnology museum, then move on to watch a dance, inspired by that art, that she has choreographed.

And in an installation that is one of the show's highlights, the Korean-born Los Angeles artist **Kang Seung Lee** commemorates and channels, through drawings, embroideries and found objects, three figures from gay history: the San Francisco politician Harvey Milk (1930-1978), the British filmmaker Derek Jarman (1942-1994), and the Korean artist and activist Oh Joon-soo (1964-1998). Of the three, Oh is the least familiar in this part of the world, but his story as an AIDS activist in Korea before his death from the disease at 34, is a valiant and moving one, and should be better known.



An installation by the Korean-born Los Angeles artist Kang Seung Lee commemorates and channels, through drawings, embroideries, and found objects, three figures from gay history. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

Given that the Triennial was assembled during the height of the pandemic, it's inevitable that certain work will be viewed, accurately or not, through the lens of pathology. Such is the case with the tumorous furniture sculptures of **Brandon Ndife**; the spiky, viral-looking ceramic wall pieces by **Erin Jane Nelson**; and **Jes Fan's** networks of transparent tubes holding black mold spores.

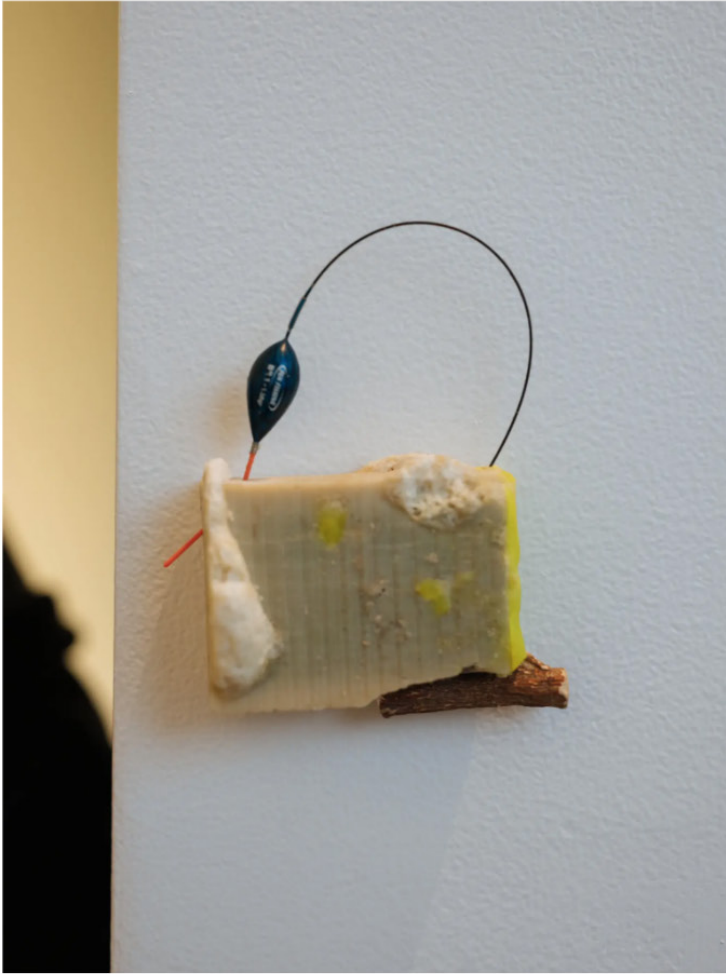
Even more pervasive than actual infection at the height of Covid, though, was the sense of disorientation and instability caused by fear of it, and the show captures that. A shambolic installation by **Krista Clark**, an artist based in Atlanta, includes a caution-orange pup tent pitched vertically on a concrete slab propped against a gallery wall. In a low-rise floor piece by the Turkish artist **Hera Buyuktasciyan**, stacks of industrial carpeting suggest the bases of Classical columns, though the columns themselves are missing. And a work by the Moscow artist **Evgeny Antufiev** that looks from afar to be a reconstructed Greco-Roman facade turns out to be nothing more than fool-the-eye wallpaper.



Krista Clark's "Annotations on Shelter 3," from 2021, features a pup tent pitched vertically on a concrete slab propped against a gallery wall. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

What fear of infection did over the past two years was isolate people, keep them indoors and, in the case of artists, in studios, where some of them worked, and worked, and worked. One result, to judge by the show, is art that's modest in scale, often tabletop size; dense in detail, and precious-feeling in a positive way. **Kahlil Robert Irving**, born in 1992 and one of the youngest participants in this predominantly 30-something show, has been producing ceramic sculpture in the mode for a while — he's already a star — and produced lots more for the show. And another sculptor with an eye for intricacy, **Harry Gould Harvey IV**, maker of quasi-mystical assemblages and co-founder of a new contemporary art museum in his industrial hometown Fall River, Mass., is one of this Triennial's finds.

Precious, as in rare and small, could also describe several fist-size assemblages by the French artist **Alex Ayed**, tucked away here and there on all three exhibition floors. Even harder to spot, at least at first, is a work by **Jeneen Frei Njootli**, a Vancouver artist of Indigenous descent. Titled "Fighting for the title not to be pending," it's composed of thousands of tiny loose glass beads — their collective weight matches that of the artist's — dispersed throughout the show. You find them everywhere, piled up in corners, lined up in cracks in the floor, and underfoot



"Untitled" (2021), an assemblage by the French artist Alex Aye. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Harry Gould Harvey IV's "Found Photograph / Fall River Fire I," 2021. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

Finally, the Haitian-born, Paris-based artist **Gaëlle Choise** has put together a room-size installation of many personal things: snapshots, dried plants, books, videos. She calls the ensemble "Temple of love — Love to love" and designates it an environment for healing.

If you count up its components and measure the space it occupies, "Temple of Love" is a big piece, but it doesn't feel at all massive. Very little in this Triennial does. It's not a showcase of competing star turns, as such surveys often are. Still, some individual works command attention. **Ambera Wellmann's** single painting, "Strobe," with its billboard scale and images of nude bodies swimming, intertwined, over a hot-pink ground, is one. And three videos are stand-alone strong.

One, "Pervasive Light," is a new three-channel piece by **Sandra Mujinga**, an artist born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and now living in Europe. It's projected onto a screen the size and shape — it has angled wings — of a triptych altarpiece. The only image is that of a black-skinned cloaked figure who moves — dances? flies? — continuously in and out of view, an embodiment of Blackness, ever-present, always elusive.

A new video installation by **Haig Aivazian**, who works in Beirut, is the exhibition's most overly topical entry. Titled "All of Your Stars Are but Dust in My Shoes," it takes the artist's films of popular uprisings during power-grid shut-offs in Lebanon in 2019 as its starting point and expands them into a flashing nocturnal essay on the politics of light and sight: Whoever controls the technology of illumination, controls who can see and who can't.



Sandra Mujinga's "Pervasive Light" (2021), a three-channel piece projected onto a screen the size and shape of a triptych altarpiece. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

The last video, "Becoming Alluvium" by the Vietnamese artist **Thao Nguyen Phan**, is topical too. It has three sections. The first two, in documentary mode, focus on Western colonialism and the impact of environmental degradation on the country's chief waterway, the Mekong River.

The last section, though, has a different message and style. It's an animated version of a Khmer folk-parable preaching the limitations of materialist ambition. In it, a princess yearns for the impossible: She wants to own jewelry made of dew. When she eventually sees the folly of her desire and is able to let go of it, she dissolves, with joy, into dew herself. The film, with its hand-painted frames, is a beauty. And it's a fitting inclusion in a visually low-glow Triennial whose ambition, in ideas and emotions, is real, but takes time and patience to crack.

2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone

Through Jan. 23 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan; 212-219-1222, newmuseum.org.