

Art Review:
“Unorthodox Exhibition” in the New York Jewish Museum

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“To stage an exhibition entitled Unorthodox in the context of the Jewish Museum might seem provocative, but the title does not refer to a critique of religious orthodoxy; rather, it speaks of orthodoxies in the plural, meaning, anything and everything that is culturally, socially, or politically normative....Art, after all, can be a brilliant means to probe previously unquestioned truths, and to allow unorthodox concepts to infiltrate orthodox systems.”

-- Jens Hoffmann, Daniel Palmer, and Kelly Taxter (Jewish Museum Staff)

Held between November 2015 and March 2016, the Jewish Museum’s exhibition of 55 artists with 200 artworks was like a creative Tsunami of expression and media. The task of arranging the works without overwhelming viewers was daunting but thoughtfully executed by Museum Deputy Director Jens Hoffmann and Curators Daniel Palmer and Kelly Taxter. This visual buffet provided ample amounts of cognitive and emotional nourishment to satisfy everyone’s aesthetic appetite.

The 200 plus artworks were organized in a thematic sequence which included 14 threads: boundaries, canon, complications, conventions, divergence, gaze, iconoclasm, individual, intensity, lies, mythologies, order, secrets, and taste.

What initially caught my eyes were the mixed media bicycle constructions by **Cryrus Kabiru**, who was born in 1984 in Nairobi, Kenya. Two bicycles, entitled “Future Bicycle I” (2014) and “Future Bicycle II” (2014), were constructed from discarded materials.



From a distance Kabiru’s works appear to be original bicycles ornately decorated. Upon closer inspection one discovers that the components are ordinary items that were collected, recycled, repurposed, and reorganized to become bikes for aesthetic purposes. Kabiru’s childhood home was located near a massive dumpsite, a landfill a few miles outside of Nairobi, Kenya’s capital. His life experiences were shaped by the environment of

discarded materials, into which he injected new life. Bikes were an essential mode of transportation in Kenya but are being replaced by made-in-China motor scooters. Kabiru gave new life and self-respect to the shanty town dwellers by allowing them to transform their wish into reality. His works resonate with the beauty of the used, aged, warmly textured, inviting art that tempts one to jump on the bike and pedal away.

Gulsun Karamustafa was born in 1946 in Ankara, Turkey and lives in Istanbul. Her seven paintings, mixed media on paper, are entitled “First of May” (1977), “Window” (1980), “First of May” (1977),¹ “Prison Paintings 1” (1978), “Icons-Paris Commune” (1978), “Long Live II” (1979), and “Soldier” (1976). Karamustafa’s artistic expression takes viewers back to the 1970s, a period of social, political, economic, and military unrest in Turkey. She witnessed and experienced cultural displacement and social strife during the deteriorating political situation. At one point she was imprisoned by the Turkish military and her passport was confiscated for 15 years. Her somber works, filled with vibrant colors, reflect living under repression and constant surveillance.



Boris Lurie was born in 1924 in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), USSR, and died in 2008 in New York City. His painting, “Untitled” (1963), is a mixed media oil and paper on canvas collage of complex and contradictory black and white photos and color images. Lurie was in the Buchenwald concentration camp during WWII. He immigrated to the United States and arrived in New York in 1946, beginning a long and productive artistic career that ended with his death at age 84. Combining volatile political issues, scenes from daily life, and erotic images, Lurie’s works depict excesses in life. He was one of the trio who founded the *No!art* movement that called for the art world to deal with controversial issues such as racism, sexism, and imperialism. He contrasted his concentration camp experiences with hedonistic American life in the 1960s. His traumatic experiences as a Holocaust survivor



made it difficult to deny the past and plunge into the tempting pleasures of American consumerism. He avoided the commercialism of art galleries, dealers, and critics whom he referred to as “the investment art market.”

Brian DeGraw was born in 1974 in Meriden, Connecticut and lives in New York City. His work is linked to music experienced as a member of the Gang Gang Dance band. DeGraw mixed various mediums such as acrylics, watercolors, colored pencils, and graphite on paper. His drawings and collages often overlap two figures and two themes and fuse them into one image by combining media.



His work, “Under Oath/Don’t Shoot” (2015), combines two images. The first is an angry White policeman taking an oath of service. The officer is superimposed over an alleged perpetrator resembling President Obama who shows he does not have a weapon.

Jeni Spota, born in 1982 in New York, works in New York City. After studying in



Italy, she was influenced by Italian cinematography: she combines religious iconography in her artworks. Her paintings contain heavily layered figures and images clustered in poses that look like colorful cake frosting. Her work, “Maesta for Simone Martini” (2015), is one of many influenced by scenes from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1971 film *Il Decameron*. Figures, images, icons, saints, and worshippers are gathered around the Virgin Mary and the Christ child in silent adoration. The mood is one of solemnity as Spota reconnects with spirits and

souls of known and unknown persons in her life.

Mrinalini Mukherjee was regarded as India’s premier female sculptor. She was born in 1949 in Mumbai, India and died in 2015 in New Delhi. Her recent works included large scale bronze sculptures. The work in this exhibition is entitled *Yakshi* (1984) and is composed of an Indian art form of dyed knotted jute or woven hemp fiber. The 7-foot-tall gray garment was named *Yakshi* after a female goddess associated with the fertility of the earth, love, and beauty. There is a male counterpart named *Yaksha*, and the two form a classification of deities or idols known as *Yakshani*, of which there are more than 36 iterations in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. The female idols were placed in villages and temples dedicated to fertility and the good health of children. Mukherjee skillfully intertwined erotic symbols in her antiform works made from natural fibers. She believed that creation flowed from many sources in our lives and that plants and flowers symbolized beauty, love, and procreation.





Michael Buthe was born in 1944 and died in 1994 in Germany. His mixed media work, entitled “Untitled (Landschaft)” (1987-1988), consisted of a large branch pierced through the middle of a framed canvas painting. Buthe studied in Dusseldorf with the internationally famous conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. Raised as a Roman Catholic, Buthe concealed his sexual identity, which he thought made him unfit as an artist and professor. A trip to Morocco in 1971 was a turning point in his life and artistic career. His works became bold assertions of emotional messages and cultural statements. The idea of inserting a large branch through the middle of a painting is shocking but sends a bold message: here I am and you cannot ignore me.

Amikam Toren was born in 1945 in Jerusalem, Israel and works in London, England. His works, entitled “Pidgin Painting (Versootzack)” (2013) and “Pidgin Painting (Boobincka)” (2005), are made of pulped canvas, PVA, and graphite. He deconstructed two essentials of traditional painting, canvas and frame, and reconstituted them into sculptural pictures. He described his artmaking process as the “museumification of the utilitarian.” At first his works resemble conceptual art, but he goes far beyond this by exposing the stretchers on the backside of the canvas. Toren is probing deeply into the meaning of painting and asking the viewer to participate in metacognition or thinking about thinking. There is simplicity, stillness, and depth in his works, which soothe the viewer.



Conclusion

The extensive 5-month-long exhibition of 200 artworks by 55 artists from different nations, races, religions, gender orientations, educational backgrounds, socio-economic

classes, political beliefs, and artmaking methods embodied diversity and multiculturalism. Although only the works of eight artists were selected for detailed comments, all participants' work fulfilled the exhibition's intention of showing unorthodox art that does not fit into the norms of the established art world. The common thread of each work was experimentation and the deconstruction of conventional expression.

Acknowledgement

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Note

1. Two pieces have the same title.

List of Artists in the Unorthodox Exhibition

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| Margit Anna (1913-1991, b. Hungary) | Zachary Harris (1976-, b. USA) |
| Austé (1950-, b. USA) | Margaret Harrison (1940-, b. UK) |
| Clayton Bailey (1939-, b. USA) | Tommy Hartung (1978-, b. USA) |
| Brian Belott (1973-, b. USA) | Nadira Husain (1980-, b. France) |
| Meriem Bennani (1988-, b. Morocco) | Jamian Juliano-Villani (1987-, b. USA) |
| Adolfo Bernal (1954-2008, b. Colombia) | Cyrus Kabiru (1984-, b. Kenya) |
| Dineo Seshee Bopape (1981-, b. South Africa) | E'wao Kagoshima (1945-, b. Japan) |
| Michael Buthe (1944-1994, b. Germany) | Gülsün Karamustafa (1946-, b. Turkey) |
| Tony Cox (1975-, b. USA) | Keiichi Tanaami (1936-, b. Japan) |
| Olga de Amaral (1932-, b. Colombia) | Július Koller (1939-2007, b. Slovakia) |
| Brian DeGraw (1974-, b. USA) | Jiri Kovanda (1953-, b. Czech Republic) |
| Marie-Louise Ekman (1944, b. Sweden) | Amadeo Lorenzato (1900-1995, b. Brazil) |
| Brenda Fajardo (1940-, b. Philippines) | Boris Lurie (1924-2008, b. Russia) |
| Christina Forrer (1978-, b. Switzerland) | Alice Mackler (1931-, b. USA) |
| Valeska Gert (1892–1978, b. Germany) | Abu Bakarr Mansaray (1970-, b. Sierra Leone) |
| Stephen Goodfellow (1953-, b. UK) | |

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| f.marquespenteado (1955-, b. Brazil) | Leang Seckon (1970-, b. Cambodia) |
| Park McArthur (1984-, b. USA) | Xanti Schawinsky (1904-1979, b. Switzerland) |
| Birgit Megerle (1975-, b. Germany) | Max Schumann (1965-, b. USA) |
| Jeffry Mitchell (1958-, b. USA) | Diane Simpson (1935-, b. USA) |
| Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015, b. India) | Philip Smith (1952-, b. USA) |
| Masatoshi Naito (1938-, b. Japan) | Hajime Sorayama (1947-, b. Japan) |
| Hylton Nel (1941-, b. Zambia) | Jeni Spota (1982-, b. USA) |
| Zoë Paul (1987-, b. UK) | Miroslav Tichy (1926-2011, b. Czech Republic) |
| Nick Payne (1982-, b. USA) | Amikam Toren (1945-, b. Israel) |
| Christina Ramberg (1946-1995, b. USA) | Endre Tót (1937-, b. Hungary) |
| Bunny Rogers (1990-, b. USA) | William T. Vollmann (1959-, b. USA) |
| David Rosenak (1957-, b. USA) | |
| Erna Rosenstein (1913-2004, b. Ukraine) | |