

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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THREE POINTS MAKE A TRIANGLE AT THE QUEENS INTERNATIONAL

At the beginning of the *2012 Queens International*, the fifth biennial of Queens artists to be staged by the Queens Museum of Art, you are asked to take a journey. The exhibit's subtitle, *Three Points Make a Triangle*, was inspired by the French surrealist René Daumal's unfinished 1944 work *Le Mont Analogique*, a "roman d'aventures alpines, non euclidiennes et symboliquement authentiques" ("a book of alpine adventures, non-euclidean and authentically symbolic") in which eight explorers employing science and metaphysics discover an invisible mountain. Daumal died of tuberculosis at the age of 36, the book and its journey cut short, halfway through a sentence in the fifth chapter.

I love French surrealism and unfinished books as much as the next liberal arts graduate, but it is a somber title for what is a lively exhibit. However, curating a show entirely of artists linked only by their current location is a bit like climbing an invisible mountain. The limits of its space are transparent, imposed by some distant city planning and urban sprawl. The artists are hardly working in a Queens silo, originating from places near and distant, their art influenced as much by their background as living in Astoria, Jackson Heights, Long Island City or Ridgewood.

How do you create a cohesive experience from 31 artists who are connected by these tenuous parameters? Like Daumal's mountain, you have to find the angles where connections meet into points. The three points of this art triangle are set out broadly in three galleries on the first floor of the Queens Museum:

- "humble materials, basic forms and energies and their discovery in everyday life"
- "possible journeys into the future and past, deploying symbols from traditional cultures, science, and mathematics" and
- "artworks that turn inward towards home and the spiritual."

If this is all sounding a bit too bizarre, don't worry, the exhibit is actually much more accessible than its premise. In fact, the journey of the *Queens International* is a lot like traveling to the Queens Museum, something that is rather daunting when looking at the subway map, but turns out to be a pleasant ride on the 7 train. But art is always welcome to be a bit more caustic than transit. Even if this year's *International* isn't going to take you on any sort of metaphysical mind trip, there are steps in the path that will give you pause.

Joe Winter's "Model for a History of Light: Conjunction" (2010) and "Untitled Model for a History of Light (Void)" (2010) are standouts for their intelligent simplicity, using construction paper and cork faded by exposure to light to chronicle the cast of shadows on the art. I remembered seeing the Long Island City-based artist's "Models for a History of Light" at Marian Spore in Brooklyn (the gallery was a short-term project where a collection was amassed in an industrial space and then closed when completed), and I'm curious if the works in the Queens Museum will also experience some alteration with the gallery lights fading the construction paper, imprinting the invisible waves from the light.

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In the same gallery (I believe this was the "possible journeys" section) Palden Weinreb has two encaustic and lithograph pieces that were muted, yet ethereal, with systematic patterns of lines and curves that seemed to echo Becket Bowes' *Elegy* series in the same room. Bowes has five oil on Dibond works numbered from "Elegy I" to "Elegy V," with mathematic principles used as a measurement of time drawn over and over, becoming more and more smudged and abstract.

The exhibit wasn't heavy on new media, dominated by sculpture, painting, collage and photography, but the video work caught my attention. Sam Clagnaz's "Behold" (2011) was seven minutes of constant surprise with sacred and silly imagery (my favorite was a monster hand typing at a keyboard) that was done in a handmade, yet obviously meticulous, way. Karen Y. Chan's "Myths" (2011) video had metallic shapes pulsing like an organism under a microscope. Adam Shecter's "BCAST Clip Show" (2008-11) was a frenzy of spliced animation and William Santen sang with a the banjo in a bathtub in "A Song for You" (2011), his hair wet and the sound synched off just enough to make what could have been an odd music video into a play on honesty.

Brian Zeeger's "Pull My Daisy (All My Doors Are Open Mix)" (2011) has the best back story in the exhibit. The artist squatted in the crumbling former apartment of Allen Ginsberg in 2006, and although much of the poet's life there had been swallowed by squalor, Zeeger noticed scarce traces and made some stop-motion animations meant as dialogues with the ghosts in the apartment. The pieces culminated into a 2008 adaptation of the Beat film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, for which Zeeger and other artists built installations that acted as sets for a reenactment in the apartment. The clips of video were then arranged in a real-time collaboration with the musician Baby Copperhead and the improvisation is what was captured and exhibited in the 2012 *International*.

While the biennial was a wonderful way to get a quick immersion into the diversity of art being created in Queens, it could have used some editing. For example, I thought Tatiana Berg's rolling "tent" sculptures were enjoyable in their exuberance with shape and color, but her two-dimensional spray paint art was less strong and was positioned across from close ups of graffiti by Robert Lobe, where the medium was depicted with scarred beauty. Likewise, Allyson Vieira had the striking plaster heads in "f(f(f(f(n))))" (2008), imperfect casts of a bust of Pericles, yet the inclusion of her "Tie-Dyes," a watercolor of tie-dyed shirts, was unnecessary.

The 31 artist roster for the 2012 *International* is smaller than in its previous incarnations due to gallery renovations at the museum, so perhaps there was a drive to make the space feel more saturated, but I think the works would have stood on their own with some more breathing room. I also felt like the paintings in the exhibit were the weaker elements, although there was an sprawling wall-sized work by David Kearns called "The Hill" (2011), that grabbed me with its dense acrylic depiction of a cemetery clogged with monuments and trees. While I didn't experience anything transcendental like climbing an invisible mountain in *Three Points Make a Triangle*, I did have my mind expanded to what art is happening now in Queens, an eclectic approach to examining time, history and personal experience. Since the role of any contemporary biennial is at its core to be a snapshot of time and place, even if those dimensions are diaphanous, the points aligned in the 2012 *Queens International* make a mountain worth scaling for the discovery of some of the borough's emerging talent.