

The Gentle Force of the New Museum Triennial

This year's iteration of the international exhibition is impressively global in its curatorial reach but the impact of some works diminishes in cross-cultural adaptation



BY ELA BITTENCOURT IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 21 DEC 21



Featuring 41 artists, the 2021 New Museum Triennial, 'Soft Water, Hard Stone', co-curated by Margot Norton and Jamillah James, takes as its overarching theme the perseverance that emerges from 'precarity and changeability', and that 'breathe[s] new life into the remains of collapsed constructs', as Norton notes in her essay 'The Moment of Change Is the Only Poem', which opens the exhibition catalogue. From Gabriela Mureb's kinetic floor sculpture *Machine #4: Stone (Ground)* (2017), in which an electrically powered rod slowly and endlessly hits a small stone, to Jeneen Frei Njootli's *Fighting for the title to not be pending* (2020) – shimmering beads, whose composite weight equals that of the artist, scattered in the cracks and corners of the museum's floors – plenty of works this year, while unobtrusive, disperse actions and gentle force.

Inspired by Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Gaëlle Choisine's *Temple of Love – Love to Love* (2021) – an installation of video screens, crates, sculptures and wire fences filling an entire backroom – springs up like a barricade around the centre of the room, cordoning off a bulbous white plaster figure reminiscent of a cultish fetish. In another element of the installation – an open-doored, neon-lit fridge – a recording of a woman's voice passionately intones: 'The more you ignore me the more I exist in you.' Together with videos in which trans and Black women, including Gaëlle's mother, discuss their lives, *Temple* is a sanctuary that transforms invisibility into permeating presence.



Gabriela Mureb, *Machine #4: Stone (Ground)*, 2017, engine, stone, and aluminium, 35 x 75 x 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York

An affirmation of resilience also informs Nadia Belerique's *Holdings* (2020–ongoing), made of three stacked rows of white plastic industrial barrels: the kind the artist's family uses to ship food, clothing and other goods from Canada to relatives in the Azores. With the barrels set up as idiosyncratic reliquaries, filled with clothing, knickknacks and toys, the assemblage redefines recycling as an interpersonal, social practice of redirecting global resources.

This triennial is robustly global, though the impact of some works diminishes in cross-cultural adaptation. The Brazilian artist Clara Ianni's *Labor Drawings* (2021), in which a graphic line represents the time that the museum's employees spend commuting to work, ranging from 10 minutes for top management to 45 minutes for most of the remaining staff, reveals surprisingly little about the relentless real-estate speculation and gentrification that New York has suffered in the past decades, or the negative impact that they have had on middle- and working-class workers. The work's political edge falls flat when considering that the museum laid off nearly one third of its staff during the pandemic, despite receiving emergency funds.



'Soft Water, Hard Stone', 2021, exhibition view, New Museum, New York. Courtesy: New Museum, New York

A fierce undercurrent of mourning – perhaps even doomsday jitters – offsets the show's emanations of resilience. Darker stirrings are keenly felt in the multitude of distressed, abraded materials, both organic and semi-synthetic, which bristle with premonitions of a posthuman future. Even the works that celebrate the uncanny beauty of mass-produced materials don't escape a certain funereal aura. In Hera Büyükaşçıyan's elegant *Nothing Further Beyond* (2021), strips of industrial carpeting are arranged into pillars, the work itself inspired by ruins: the Arch of Theodosius in Istanbul. Brandon Ndiye's post-apocalyptic assemblages combine insulation foam, resin, rubber and earth pigments. In *Market Fare* (2021), a green kitchen table sprouts tuberous vegetables, its top made to look like lumps of soil, as if buried in a landslide or riveted by imploding roots.

Two works that encapsulate apocalyptic fantasia in all its frightful-yet-arresting glory occupy the same space on the third floor. Laurie Kang's *Great Shuttle* (2020–21), a massive steel scaffolding, splits the middle of the gallery. Kang balances the brutality of her piece's armature – its cold, mechanic skeleton – with soft, red-tinted panelling of photosensitive sheets. On the neighbouring wall, Ambera Wellmann's luminous, large-scale, oil and mixed-media piece, *Strobe* (2021), depicts humans (young girls smoking, another grouping of naked lovers in an orgiastic embrace, still another, melded with bird-like forms, taking flights), humanoids and fleshy mutants (fish and bird offshoots), in a futurist reckoning. This Technicolor exodus teems with cataclysmic energies of transfiguration. With its prodigious painterly references (Hieronymus Bosch and William Blake are, perhaps, most prominent), Wellmann's piece is voluptuous yet disorienting in its gravity-defying expansiveness. Alongside Wellmann and Kang, Jes Fan's *Networks (for Rupture)* and *Networks (for Expansion)* (both 2021) consist of plastic tubes that contain viscous condensation of sporing black mould. Together, these three works not only hint at the materialist tenacity and hidden potencies of our biosphere but, even more urgently, at a latent fear of what our own planetary endgame might hold.

'Soft Water, Hard Stone' is on view at the New Museum, New York, until 23 January 2022.

Main image: 'Soft Water, Hard Stone', 2021, exhibition view, New Museum, New York. Courtesy: New Museum, New York

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