

The Hammer's Made In L.A. Isn't Really About Newness or L.A. — But That's OK

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The logo for LA Weekly, featuring the letters 'LA' in a large, bold, black font, followed by the word 'WEEKLY' in a smaller, bold, black font.

"Newness is, like, the least new thing there is," says an unnamed woman who's wearing a hoodie and staring at herself in a mirror. She's a reluctant theorist and a character in the screenplay-as-essay that critic Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer wrote for the "Made in L.A. 2016" catalog. This "Made in L.A." is the third local biennial the Hammer Museum has organized since 2012 and, with 26 artists, it's the smallest.

The woman in the hoodie is talking about internet-informed image culture, which celebrates constant proliferation over close looking, but her statement resonates with this current "Made in L.A." in other ways.

Vaguely titled “a, the, though, only” (artist-poet Aram Saroyan came up with those words) and curated by Chicago-based Hamza Walker and Hammer curator Aram Moshayedi, this show doesn't make much of an attempt to put a finger on current trends. It takes a looser approach to regionalism and newness.

Since its inception, Made in L.A. has shown the work of younger artists alongside works by older and midcareer artists. “It's built into the framework, to focus on emerging artists and artists who have been underrecognized,” says curator Walker, who works as education director and curator at Chicago Renaissance Society but comes to L.A. frequently.

In the show's previous incarnations, however, there has seemed to be a bigger divide, aesthetically and in presentation, between the older, underrecognized artists and the younger, emerging ones. The debut 2012 show, which had a five-person curatorial team, included practitioners in their 70s and early 80s, such as Channa Horwitz (who died a year later) and Simone Forti. These artists' work had a sagelike feel and was notably different from the work submitted by artists from a younger generation. But at this year's show, every artist is treated with a kind of careful evenness, making age differences less noticeable and sidestepping the excitement that a hot young artist or a “rediscovered” aging phenom might elicit.

“People often ask if there was a particular idea behind how the [show is] organized,” Moshayedi says. “We included fewer artists, and gave consideration to different ways of using the space.”

“We wanted to kind of focus on longer, more in-depth projects by all the artists,” Walker adds.

The Hammer's permanent collection was uninstalled in order to make more galleries available for individual projects. The installations don't necessarily go together — transitions from one room to another are

jarring at times — but, to use Moshayedi's words, they feel like “complete statements.”

One of the more striking, extensive installations in the show features the work of Huguetta Caland, who no longer lives in L.A. The 85-year-old artist returned to her native Beirut three years ago to retire, but when she did live here, from 1987 through 2013, she was an influential anomaly. In Venice, she built a concrete house with two towers, and hosted dinners where artists would come to argue. Ed Moses, an artist-surfer associated with L.A.'s cool-school generation, gave her a particularly hard time. “Huguetta had her own way of doing things,” he recalls in the exhibition catalog, “which I thought was a little bourgeois.” She was the daughter of Lebanon's first republican president and had lived in Paris after leaving Beirut.

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Huguetta Caland, installation view, “Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only”; Credit: Photo by Brian Forrest

In the gallery devoted to Caland's work, handmade mannequins with

oddly shaped faces wear caftans, one with breasts, genitals and the outline of butt cheeks drawn onto it. Caland made these in the 1970s, when collaborating with French designer Pierre Cardin, and would wear them herself. Her ceramics, abstract but anthropomorphic, sit on knee-high pedestals, and her paintings hang on the walls. The paintings are also bodily, and sometimes it looks as if figures have been linked together, fingers and limbs plugging into orifices in ways that are sexual but also flattened and funny. Two flesh-colored mounds painted on a teal background could either be bare knees or a rear end.

Nearby, an army of human-sized wood sculptures by Kenzi Shiokava stands on low-to-the-ground white pedestals. Born in 1938 in Brazil to Japanese parents, Shiokava, too, is a longtime L.A. artist who doesn't quite fit into local mythology. His totems look like ancient aliens, and recall the biomorphic sculptures of midcentury Europeans just as easily as they recall the skilled outsider woodwork by Californians Sam Maloof and J.B. Blunk. Across the way, over the bridge that connects the museum's main galleries, drawings by musician and composer Wadada Leo Smith — made according to a notation system he invented circa 1970 — accompany recordings that guests can listen to on headphones. The notations are Kandinsky-like, colorful and full of movement, and largely unfamiliar — Smith has exhibited his visual work only occasionally.

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Daniel Small, installation view, "Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only"; Credit: Photo by Brian Forrest

The room featuring Smith's work is sandwiched between two starkly different installations. One is a project by Daniel Small, a culmination of six years of work (*L.A. Weekly* [has covered previous incarnations](#)). Small has been excavating the site where Cecil B. DeMille built and then buried the set for his 1923 film, *The Ten Commandments*. Fragments of sphinxes and a staff, preserved by the men who run a local Napa Auto Parts store, appear in rows of vitrines. Small has written descriptive texts that give the quirkily anecdotal and historical context for the objects, all real artifacts initially made to support a fictional narrative. On the walls, painted Chromakey blue, hang murals originally painted for the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas — epic, sexy and historically dubious depictions of ancient Egypt.

Then, on the opposite side, is an installation by Sterling Ruby, well known as a market darling. His inclusion in the show had been a surprise — he

didn't seem to qualify as either under-recognized or emerging, given that he shows with blue-chip galleries and his works have sold at auction for upward of \$600,000.

Sterling Ruby, installation view, "Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only"; Credit: Photo by Brian Forrest

"I think it comes with the mandate of being emerging and underrecognized, the sense that there are different kinds of lack of recognition," Walker says. "People would roll their eyes [when they hear Ruby would be in the show]. But it's been over seven years since he'd been seen in L.A."

"He had a solo show at MOCA in 2008," Moshayedi clarifies. "The work traffics in the art market. There's a preoccupation with that, rather than an attempt to address the work itself."

The project consists of steel tables, made to replicate the tables that were in Ruby's Vernon studio when the artist moved in. Ruby's replicas include evidence of all the bumps, grooves, slag and wear that accumulated over the years. They're imposing objects, tightly constructed, silvery black in color and almost goth in their mood. The diversity of moods and materials in the show makes it both a hard exhibition to like right away, and one that makes paying attention to individual artists significantly easier than in past Hammer biennials. Racial diversity had become a heated question after the last biennial — poet Sesshu Foster wrote a critique of its whiteness, and alt-space Human Resources hosted a discussion about whiteness in local institutions.

On paper, this show does better. There are more artists of color than before, more artists at different points in their careers.

"There's a distinction between the show itself and the politics of the list," Walker says, meaning that the apparent diversity reflected in names and

numbers isn't the same as the way the show looks and feels. "Can you achieve diversity in tone rather than statistical fact?"

Kelly Akashi, installation view, "Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only"; Credit: Photo by Brian Forrest

The curators did achieve a diversity in tone, an unexpected fluidity between methods and mediums and artists' positions. No one room is like the others. Rafa Esparza's handmade adobe bricks line one whole side of the museum's balcony. Guthrie Lonergan's animated M&Ms, which spout theoretical notions, jump up and down continuously on the museum's website. Martine Syms performs on laughing gas in a video installation that plays with language and self-control. Kelly Akashi's creaturelike, vaginal sculptures hang above the courtyard, and Kenneth Tam explores masculinity with a group of men who volunteered to be vulnerable on film.

The barely-there through-line works, even if not all installations are equally strong. It suggests future "Made in L.A." biennials could be more about giving artists attention, space and support, and less about the kind of broad statement-making about a city and its artists that inevitably gets stale and shticky.