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'Made in L.A.' the Hammer Museum Biennial

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"Untitled red #5," 2015, MPA, Inkjet print, 7 x 7 in. (17.8 x 17.8 cm)
(Courtesy MPA)

In preparation for this year's "Made in L.A." biennial, Hammer Museum curators Anne Ellegood and Erin Christovale ventured out to more than 200 artists' studios over seven months and visited dozens of gallery and museum exhibitions. They narrowed a list of hundreds down to 32 artists.

The result of their work is "Made in L.A. 2018," the fourth iteration of the Hammer's popular group exhibition, which focuses on emerging artists who represent a cross-section of the greater Los Angeles area, with some established, veteran artists sprinkled in.

"When we started doing studio visits, we weren't necessarily thinking of anything to drive the show," said Christovale, a recently appointed assistant curator at the Hammer, which is affiliated with UCLA. "But nationally speaking, there's been a major shift — the election of a new president and the new political

climate that we're all dealing with. It's sort of a thread throughout the show. It's not necessarily that that artists are reacting to it, but more so, they're bringing in their personal stories."

Hammer senior curator Ellegood concurs. "In the end, we were drawn to work, or artists' practices, that seemed to be contending with the current moment. We definitely saw some shared interests emerge: issues of the environment, landscape, the histories of land and landscape in Southern California."

"Made in L.A. 2018" opens June 3 and is on view through Sept. 2. Artists range from Mercedes Dorame (b. 1981), a member of the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe of California, who explores her grandparents' land in Malibu through photography; to Daniel Joseph Martinez (b. 1957), a conceptual provocateur who rocked the 1993 Whitney Biennial with admission badges that read, "I Can't Ever Imagine Wanting to Be White." Martinez, along with James Benning and Linda Stark, will exhibit works that represent their practices at mid-career.

But the majority of artists are on the younger side, born in 1975 or later. Iranian American Gelare Khoshgozaran (b. 1986) has created a film that explores the physical similarities between California and her home country of Iran. A portion of the film was shot at Medina Wasl, a national Army training center in the California desert that's used to simulate a Middle Eastern town.

"It's supposed to look like Iran or Afghanistan and it speaks to the ongoing wartime effort," Christovale said, "which is weird. Super weird."

The artist who calls herself "MPA" (b. 1980) will install a sculpture, "Faultline," which will meander through the museum's outdoor courtyard and terrace and into the galleries, conjuring a symbolic space in which oppositional and complementary positions intend to meet.

GOING BEYOND PAINT ON CANVAS

Reflecting the nature of art today, the artworks in the LA biennial span a broad range of mediums, from painting, sculpture and photography to textiles, performance, video, assemblage and installation. Diedrick Brackens (b. 1989) combines European tapestries, African textiles and Southern American quilting techniques to trace the trajectories of African American histories and experiences. He will have three large-scale wall tapestries on view – they're structured like a play in three acts.

Flora Wiegmann (b. 1976) is a dancer who will perform live in the galleries five times during the biennial. A 6-part video of her performance, called "Reduction Burn," will play on monitors throughout the run of the exhibition.

"I was really excited that additionally, once we got to talking, to make sure I had gallery space as well, instead of just a performance," said Wiegmann, who lives in Venice. "I like to perform in the same space as the audience. I like to interact with the bodies and show how dance can be an object. It can have a weight to it." Wiegmann's recent work is inspired by the 2017 California wildfires and their resulting destruction and degradation on the landscape.

Naotaka Hiro (b. 1972), like a few other artists in the biennial, focuses on the body and actually uses his body to make humanscaled paintings and sculptures. His influences include Bruce Nauman and Gutai, the Japanese avant-garde art collective active from 1954 to 1972.

"I started to draw this image I had," said Hiro, a Pasadena resident, about the germination of his latest series. "I had a storyboard and I drew movement and poses. Then I place my body directly onto the paper. I used the shape of my body, or even movement – that's how I started the work on paper. And with my life-

cast sculpture, it's the same idea. I wrap myself with plastic silicon to get my body double. I paint inside a bag in the canvas. I wrap myself – the medium is always in direct contact with my body.”

Carmen Argote (b. 1981) of LA's Lincoln Heights neighborhood makes installations out of everyday objects – coffee makers, coffee, paper, muslin fabric circles and acrylic paint. Her “Platform with Mobile Unit,” 2017, made a splash at the Panel.LA group exhibition in 2017.

“I'm really happy to be included in this group,” said Argote, 36, who was born in Guadalajara, Mexico and moved to the United States when she was 5. Through college, grad school and the LA art scene, she knows several of her fellow artists in the biennial. “The conversation between the artists is especially exciting for me. It's great to have that discourse across time.”

John Houck (b. 1977) borrows from his background as a computer programmer and IT guy to make a new kind of photography.

“It's more akin to painting,” said the Silver Lake resident. “With each subsequent photo I can change the direction of the light. Through re-photographing and printing, I can make something new. For me, it kind of speaks to this iterative feedback nature of making a picture. You get the same kind of feeling writing a few lines of code, seeing how it works, then writing a few more.”

Houck's work, “The Creation Of,” 2016, caught the attention of the Hammer curators with its theatrical and painterly elements, and its photographic depiction of two hands entering the right side of the image and touching the needles of two cacti.

“Each image is a new input,” he said. “So the output gets sent back in as an input.”

Houck says being a part of “Made in L.A. 2018” is “a tremendous honor,” and the biennial itself is a great barometer of artistic talent in Los Angeles.

“It's the best place for an artist to live, no question,” he said of Los Angeles. Houck has also lived in New York City and was born and raised in South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

“Perceptual experiences are so LA – thinking about the way in which color and the light of LA influences one's perception,” he said. “Space here is much better. In New York, you have to hustle so hard to be able to afford a tiny studio. There's something a little more at-ease (here) and laid back that I really appreciate.

Houck also believes that the LA art world is growing, and offers breathing room and privacy for developing artists. “You don't have people constantly looking at your work and being so on display all the time. In LA, you can carve out your own private space as well.”

ORIGINS OF A BIENNIAL

“Made in L.A.” started in 2012, with a second version in 2014 and a third in 2016. The biennials stem from the Hammer's invitational exhibitions, which occurred every two years and included “Snapshot” in 2001, “International Paper” in 2003, “Thing” in 2005, “Eden's Edge” in 2007, “Nine Lives” in 2009 and “All of this and nothing” in 2011.

The first “Made in L.A.” was organized by a team of curators from the Hammer Museum and LAXART, an independent, nonprofit art space in West Hollywood that features contemporary and experimental art, lectures and events.

Participants in this biennial will not leave empty handed. Each artist receives an honorarium for his or her work. In addition, three awards will carry cash prizes, funded by Los Angeles philanthropists and art collectors Jarl and Pamela Mohn. The Mohn Award of \$100,000 and the Career Achievement Award of

\$25,000 will be selected by a professional jury. The Public Recognition Award of \$25,000 will be determined through a public vote. All the artists in the exhibition are eligible to receive the awards.

The biennial's curators want to emphasize the diversity of the artists included in the show, as they hail from Tehran, Mumbai, Guadalajara, San Salvador, Osaka, Caracas and many other cities and countries. Two-thirds of the participating artists are women.

"Artists from this particular show are from all over the place, and have continued that conversation with their homeland in interesting ways," Christovale said. "LA is also very much an international city. That's something that also comes out in this show."