

The New York Times

Many Hands in Creative Frenzy

‘NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial’ Has About 100 Contributors



A detail of Misha Kahn's "Saturday Morning Store," part of "NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial" at the Museum of Arts and Design. Jake Naughton/The New York Times

The Museum of Arts and Design is plunging into the deep end of the biennial pool with a big, messy splash. Part swan dive, part belly-flop, its inaugural edition, "NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial," is an ambitious, inchoate, sometimes dissatisfying sampling of visual culture from across the five boroughs.

Smith, Roberta. "‘NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial’ Has About 100 Contributors" *The New York Times*. July 3, 2014.

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MAD is, of course, the acronym for the museum's latest name, adopted in 2002 after the institution spent decades as the American Craft Museum. With its move in 2008 to Columbus Circle from West 53rd Street in Manhattan, the letters seem intended to imply feverish innovation, but they also conjure "madcap" and a lack of seriousness. Far too much that goes on view in this museum qualifies as fun, cute, clutter-making or useless, and seems aimed at people with plenty of disposable income, homes to decorate and a yen for unusual items. "The MAD Biennial" is not enough of an exception to this, but it hasn't really had time to be. Its problems are signaled just inside the front door with the glittery party decorations of Confettisystem.



"Vigilant Floral," by Flavor Paper and Dan Funderburgh. Jake Naughton/*The New York Times*

The biennial's first iteration was proposed in October by the museum's new director, Glenn Adamson, as he arrived from the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, where he was director of research. The show represents 100 creative individuals, duos and collectives, whom it instructively calls "makers," to level the usual hierarchies among art, craft and design; high and low and beyond. Its egalitarian outlook is reflected in a selection process that began with 300 of New York's cultural movers and shakers, who nominated 400 makers. In the name of transparency, the members of this committee on steroids — perhaps as close as New York gets to a People's Choice format — are listed in the catalog.

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The nominees (who also might have been listed) were then winnowed down to 100 by a committee of 10 professionals from every borough, as well as Mr. Adamson; Lowery Stokes Sims, the museum's chief curator; and Jake Yuzna, its director of public programs and the show's chief architect. Mr. Yuzna then visited studios and consulted with the participants, over 80 percent of whom are showing at the museum for the first time. Many works were made especially for the show. Nearly everything in sight is by one of the exhibition's participants, including some of the pedestals, benches and lights. And, in the catalog, the usual director's introduction is printed on the opening endpapers, a nice touch that reflects both the tightness of space as well the desire to rethink things.



Several of the 100 or so works on view in "NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial."

Jake Naughton/The New York Times

The selected artists span the generations, including éminences grises like Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk, whose contributions feel obligatory, to Yoko Ono, still rocking and mildly pretentious at 81 with a music video that includes cameos by talents like Questlove, Ira Glass and Kim Gordon. Outstanding among the newbies are the imaginative tattoo artist Amanda Wachob and the fashion team of Eckhaus Latta, whose slouchy clothing designs, seen on video, operate somewhere between Comme des Garçons and Susan Cianciolo, while their models include elderly Chinese ladies doing qi gong and the designers' J. Crew-ready friends. For a sense of the actual garments, the museum's guards are all wearing a smart vest I wouldn't mind taking home.

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Shoehorned boutique-style into two floors of galleries, with additional works throughout the building, the exhibition probably looks as good as it can. It is arranged according to big, sometimes amorphous themes — the studio, community gardens, performance and tools — and spans scores of mediums and hybrid mediums, including objects of art and design, sound art, neon signs, wallpaper, theatrical costumes and a nightclub interior that desperately needs revelers (although the plants are nice). And don't forget the artisanal candy, coffee, liquor and ax. Did I mention that a majority of the participants work in Brooklyn?



Clothing, including Marvin Goldman's choir dress, far left, is in "NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial." Jake Naughton/The New York Times



An installation view of "NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial" at the Museum of Arts and Design. Jake Naughton/The New York Times

There are examples of new technologies, some of which seem slightly redundant, like Miriam Simun's tialike head piece intended to enhance smell while the wearer is eating. Others are tantalizingly futuristic, like Aisen Caro Chacin's "Echolocation Headphones": mini-radar screens that promise to enhance the wearer's spatial acuities.

And some participants seem as much doers as makers, most notably the Spectacle theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, an all-volunteer micro-cinema (think of DIY Cinémathèque Française) that screens rare films and is also an educational center. In addition, the collective BFAMFAPhD is shaping information, sifting through recent census data to reveal the racial (mostly white) breakdown of the many New Yorkers with art degrees. And one member, Lika Volkova, also turns discarded paintings into garments with striking results, going by two jackets here.

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There are numerous artists, including some known for functional art. Paula Hayes is represented by three large, thriving terrariums, biomorphic in shape and made of handblown glass. The painter Marilyn Minter contributes wallpaper as shiny and glamorous as her Photo Realist canvases. Donald Moffett's gray painting combines art with obsessive craft: Its mysterious furred surface might be trying to tickle our eyeballs. And Hank Willis Thomas, who tends to be hit and miss, has a winner in a technologically advanced screen print, "And I Can't Run." Made with the Lower East Side Printshop, it is a diaphanous white-on-white image. But photograph it with your cellphone, and it registers shockingly in vivid black and white as an early-20th-century photograph of the public punishment of an African-American. This discreet presentation of a horrific image that also enacts the suppressed legacy of slavery is one of the show's most emotionally real moments.



A video by Yoko Ono Plastic Ono Band and a related painting. Jake Naughton/The New York Times

The biennial also honors those who labor behind the scenes with, for example, a Roman Catholic bishop's choir dress by Marvin Goldman of Duffy and Quinn/Craft Robe Company, and the wonderfully textured approximations of armor worn by dancers in the Cincinnati Ballet's recent production of "King Arthur's Camelot," designed by Sandra Woodall and made by Sally Ann Parsons of Parsons-Meares. A custom museum crate by Boxart is a work of art in itself. (It was built to transport a table/sculpture by Wendell Castle in the museum's collection.)

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One reason for the term “makers” is that there is so much multitasking, but the results are not equally good. Too many participants here are not thinking critically enough about innovation or purpose. Constantin Boym and Laurene Leon Boym, the married founders of Boym Partners, are represented by small bonded-metal monuments to a century of American disasters (the Triangle Waist Company fire, President Kennedy’s assassination, Sept. 11). The pair would have been better served by their stainless-steel flatware, reproduced in the show’s catalog, than by these Conceptual Art knickknacks. And some hybrids are simply neither here nor there, notably “Moonmilk,” by Chen Chen & Kai Williams, a large vase made from delicate pours of pigmented concrete left over from making planters. Generic as art and as design, it is basically a conversation piece.

Exceptions to the show’s superficiality include Charles Goldman’s “RE>CRETE>BLKS,” recycled building material made mostly from plastic trash, and Misha Kahn and Anne Libby’s painterly paving stones of concrete and pigment. Most impressive, however, is a prototype for the PowerClip, an unfolding device akin to an enlarged jackknife that enables small electronic devices (six at time) to be run off car batteries. Designed by Robin Reid, Surya Mattu, Phil Groman and Federico Zannier, it is strikingly plain (one red section, one black), a relief from the prevailing froufrou. It could actually save lives.

This exhibition, which will be accompanied by a full retinue of performances and workshops, gives the Museum of Arts and Design an expanded reach and vitality. It is well worth seeing, even if you mostly argue your way through it. But not enough here contributes to a principle increasingly elusive in this country: the greater good. Too often, its contents look distressingly appropriate for a city with a shrinking middle class, whose architectural fabric is being ruined by a flood of new condos for rich people who don’t actually live here. It would be great not to condone this particular madness.

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