Cultural Daily

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Hung Up: On Hammer's Woe Factor

James L. Chapman · Wednesday, February 20th, 2019

Wistfully reminisce LA Art Week with his holiness Takashi Murakami at Gagosian, Kelly Berg and Caroline Larsen at Pete and Susan Barrett Art Gallery, or catch TAG's Reed, Reinis & Wilbert's opening reception… Any of which will surely offer more substance in a brochure than Hammer will in a gallery.

You could rummage through your grandma's dusty attic or you could spend an hour briskly walking towards the exit of the Hammer Museum's Winter Exhibition. Both are free. Both may yield an artifact you think is cool, but wouldn't want to take home. Both will leave you wondering if that was a waste of time. With their Winter Exhibition Series, Hammer woefully lives up to its "Museum" moniker, headlining an Allen Ruppersberg retrospective and the loosely mustered "Dirty Protest" exhibition.

Rather than argue the merits of specific works, let's just say "Dirty Protest" is aptly labeled thanks to the thin layer of dust that's settled on both the works and ideas presented in this series. Borrowing from their contemporary collection, Hammer has assembled—or rather disassembled—a series of exhibitions with no relevance or meaning, and the ambiguity of it all is maddening.

"A Steep Path" by Jamila Sabur – On view at Hammer Museum

You'll probably find some diamonds in this visage of head-scratching works, but not without sifting through a showcase that feels more like a natural history museum's homage to teen angst than a prideful composition of contemporary art. Far more vociferous than the show's theme was the public's response on opening night. As one visitor remarked, "The people here are definitely more interesting than anything hanging in this room." Just then a ruckus broke out across the crowded gallery as an older gentleman shouted, "It's just so bad!" There was a DJ. There were breadsticks…the breadsticks seemed to attain the best reviews of the evening.

"Eleanor Antin" by Lynne Traiger, 1971 – On view at Hammer Museum

As some patient members of the public donned booties over their shoes to enter a sculptural installation, others wondered where they could find face masks before getting close to canvases assuredly locked up in storage for the past 30 years. While the latter comment carries jest, the gallery spaces actually emitted an undeniable must; a testament to the archaic dialogue

occurring within. As the adage goes, “give credit where credit is due.” The same must hold true when reputable institutions should be taken to task. A show so overtly confusing and eclectic is a disservice to emerging artists and the city’s collective art museums as they wage a losing battle to pop-up installations and social media dissemination. Poor execution is even more glaring when Hammer boasts recent acquisitions like Ellsworth Kelly and Nicole Eisenman. Worst of all is the fact that the astounding Tschabalala Self’s *Bodega Run* installation (on view at Hammer until 4/28) is tucked into limited space and receives only a meek blurb in the program’s guide. *Bodega Run* is the Winter Exhibition’s saving grace—a profound examination of neighborhood convenience stores as communal resorts and beacons of gathering—but its placement as the museum’s introductory exhibit is bewildering as it’s one of few examples of modernity meets meaning.

With a heavy heart, you are hereby advised to skip the Hammer Museum until they turn over exhibitions in May. Until then, the gift shop is one of its best attractions.

Plus they’re all out of breadsticks.

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