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ART REVIEW

3 Knockout Art Shows to See in Los Angeles Right Now



The performance artist EJ Hill at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. He appears at the Hammer, six days a week, standing on a podium like a gold medal winner. Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

By **Holland Cotter**

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LOS ANGELES — If I were a young artist choosing a big coastal city to land in, I'd opt for Los Angeles. No contest. Sure, there are problems, starting with traffic, sprawl and [gentrification](#). Housing is hard to find here. It is in New York too, but here the weather's kinder.

As in New York, unless you're a cis white male, you'll likely have art-world entry issues here. In Los Angeles, though, art world ethnic mixing and gender parity, to the extent that they exist, at least feel relatively unforced and organic. And I'm sure many people are working hard to make that so.

Maybe the convincer is, despite the gas-eating miles between everything here, the city still has something like old-time art communities, a social network still only partly regulated by the imperatives of the market machine. The city's museums, even its biggest ones, also have a certain independent streak, a willingness to depart from standard models in the kinds of shows they do and the way they do them, as I noted when I recently dropped in on a few.

'Made in L.A. 2018'

Hammer Museum

O.K., I confess, my take on the Los Angeles art world as manageable, equitable and communal is heavily based on seeing an exhibition called ["Made in L.A. 2018"](#) at the Hammer Museum. The first edition of the show was in 2012, conceived as a biennial for local talent, though only a small number of this year's artists were born here. Most are transplants who've stayed, which says something positive right there.



Visitors study Lauren Halsey's "The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project" at the Hammer Museum. Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Even more positive: Of the 33 participants, two-thirds are women. Several are black, Latino or of Asian descent, and at least as many self-identify as queer. The show doesn't tout these demographics. It treats diversity as natural, normal.

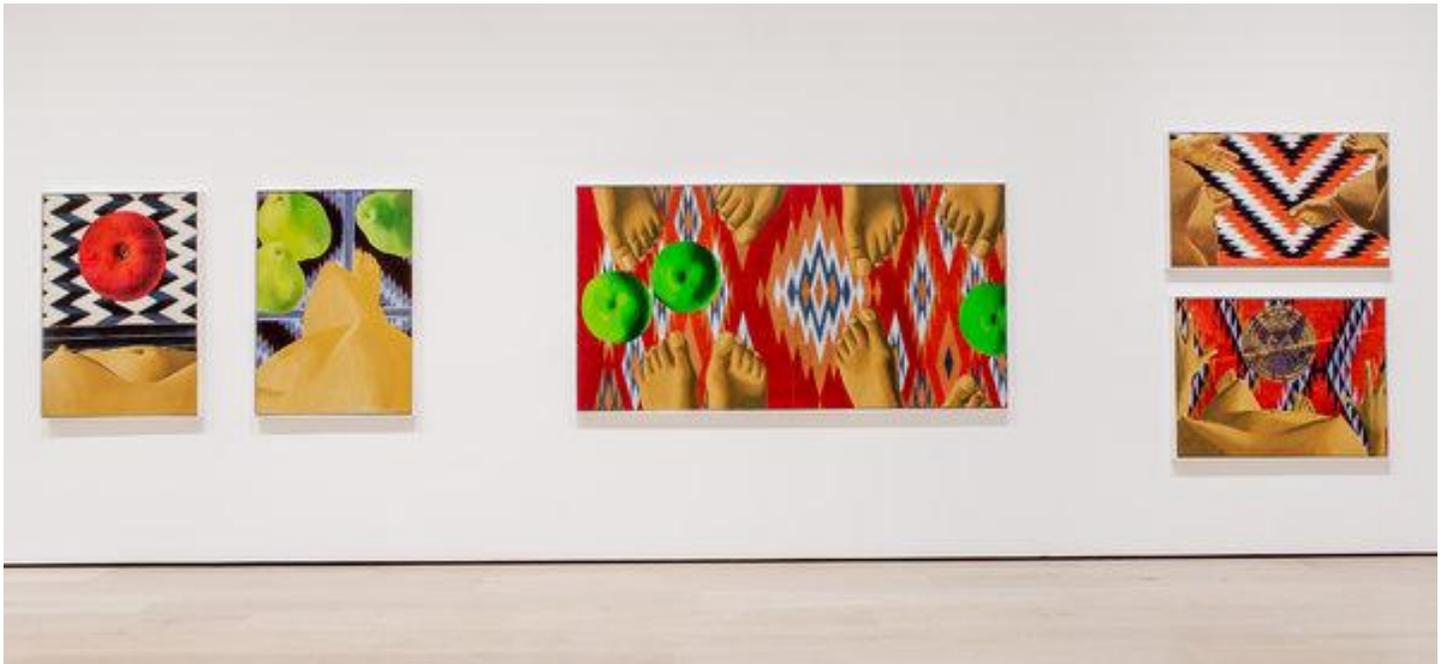
Nor have the Hammer curators — Anne Ellegood, Erin Christovale and MacKenzie Stevens — conceived the show along overarching political lines. The operative idea seems to be that all art is fundamentally political and artists will find their own themes.

For some, the theme is the city. In a series of photographs, Mercedes Dorame, born here in 1980, focuses on the Gabrielino-Tongva Indians, who have occupied the Los Angeles Basin for millennia, and from whom she is descended. On the Hammer's terrace, Lauren Halsey, another young Angeleno, has built a monument to the vanishing African-American neighborhood she grew up in. (She also has a [solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art](#) through Sept. 3.)

The performance artist EJ Hill recently revisited six of the seven Los Angeles schools he attended, in all of which he experienced racial hostility. For this biennial, he did fear-conquering victory laps around each (documented in handsome photographs by

Texas Isaiah). And he now appears at the Hammer, six days a week, standing on a podium like a gold medal winner.

Even the local art world gets props in paintings by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, which include a portrait of the community-minded Los Angeles artist [Eve Fowler](#). Ms. Dupuy-Spencer, a former New Yorker, paints overtly political subjects too: a Trump rally, a toppled Confederate statue. And topical threads weave through the show.



Luchita Hurtado's paintings at the Hammer Museum. Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

A meditative video piece by the veteran filmmaker James Benning suggests karmic links between the 1960s bombings of Vietnam by the United States and today's California wild fires. A narrative textile hanging by Diedrick Brackens, at 29 the show's youngest artist, looks like a tropical fantasy but refers to a real-life story of three black men who died in police custody. At a time when "Build the Wall" is a campaign cry, the Mexican-American artist Daniel Joseph Martinez documents himself walking the entire length of where the Berlin Wall once stood.

Mr. Martinez is one of this city's most influential artists and teachers, though the show has under-the-radar talent too. The big discovery is [Luchita Hurtado](#), 97, who in the 1960s and '70s, with second-wave feminism revving up, was making extraordinary paintings of her own body merging with what could easily be a Southern California landscape. (She was in New Mexico at the time.) She's paired at the Hammer with Christina Quarles, 60 years her junior, who also paints bodies embedded on their environments, but racially and sexually ambiguous and multiple. Both artists are hands-down stars of one of the strongest and most cohesive biennials I've seen anywhere in years.

Made in L.A. 2018

Through Sept. 2 at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; 310-443-7000, hammer.ucla.edu.

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