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Teaching a New Inclusiveness at The School

In 'Feedback,' a 21-artist knockout of a show, Helen Molesworth curates a nuanced and complicated conversation about race — the kind of talk we desperately need.

By Will Heinrich Published Aug. 12, 2021

KINDERHOOK, N.Y. — Feedback is what you get when a system's output is looped through its input, as when Jimi Hendrix, closing out the Woodstock music festival in 1969, used an electric guitar with an overdriven amplifier to turn a performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" into a dizzying tone poem of anguish and destruction.

Though the gesture was received at the time as a protest — of the Vietnam War, of racial inequality, of everything wrong with America — Hendrix, himself a U.S. Army vet, was cagey about his intentions. It would probably be truer to borrow some contemporary art jargon and call what he did to the national anthem "complicating" it. Of course protest was a part of it. But it was the tension between his protest and the song's usual bombast, which he also captured, that really summed up his historical moment and made the rendition iconic.



Jack Shainman Gallery's outpost, The School, in Kinderhook, N.Y. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

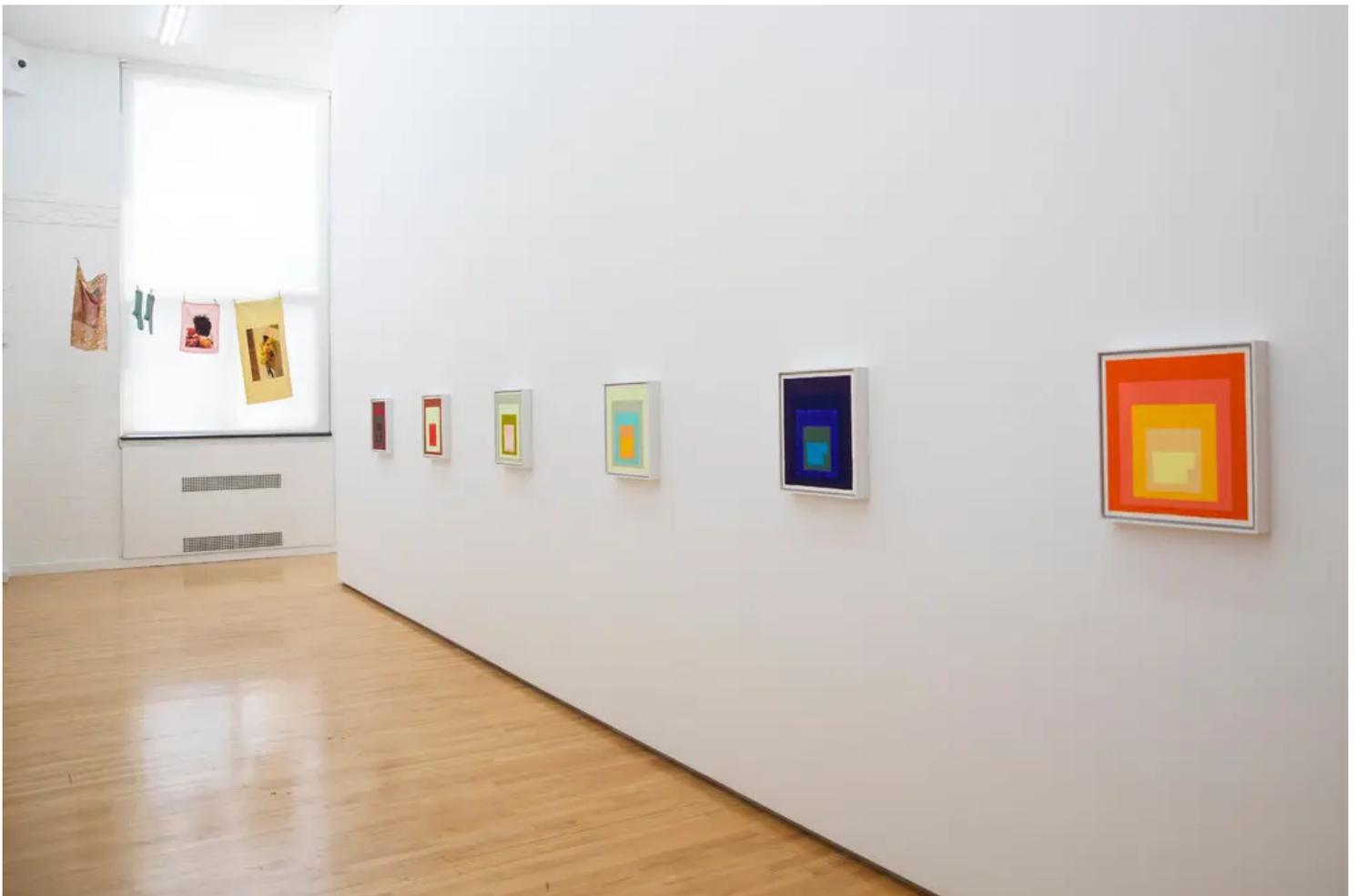
If we're going to make museums genuinely representative — and, more broadly, make progress as a divided and unequal society — we're going to have to learn to complicate the exhibits and how we talk about them, in the same way.

It's something Helen Molesworth, the former chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, pulls off brilliantly in "Feedback," a 21-artist knockout of a show she organized for The School, Jack Shainman Gallery's upstate outpost. Most of the work deals in some way with race, sex, or color, though not all of it. But Molesworth organizes the pieces less by content than by visual rhythm and contrast, creating deeply evocative undertones that subtly connect the works and highlight their nuances while making sure nothing is reduced to any pat political message.

She took her inspiration, and the show's title, from a piece by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, a large Marshall amplifier set close to the building's entrance. (A 30,000 square foot former high school, The School has a number of galleries on three levels, all of them used for this show.) When you step on the amp's attached wah-wah pedal, it plays the guitarist Frank Zappa's recreation of the Hendrix version loud enough to shake your sternum. But you can't step back, because there's only so much cord, and the moment you lift your foot, the music stops.

Flanking this piece is "Flight Path," one of several extraordinary ceramic sculptures by Rose B. Simpson, who lives and works on the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. A dark, 8-foot-tall figure with elongated torso and neck, long leather thongs for arms, and feet painted light gray with clay slip, she gazes up into the ceiling with empty eye sockets. Between the figure and the amp is an untitled wall piece by Steve Locke, a New York-based artist who teaches at Pratt: blue neon spelling out "I Remember Everything You Taught Me Here."

Together, the amplifier, the figure and the neon gel into a triple artwork in their own right, a biting meditation on history, memory and defiance. John Buck's "Talk of the Town (The)," a nude wooden figure with a complex of American buildings and statues in place of a head, adds a grace note across the hall.



A view of the Perimeter Gallery with Steve Locke's "Homage to the Auction Block" (2020), right, with the shape of an auction block at the center of Josef Albers, and Tyler Mitchell's "Laundry Line" (2020) at the back. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

In her introduction to the show, Molesworth mentions the American history she never learned in school. She means the history of violence against African Americans and Native Americans in particular, and Black and Native American history in general. What we do learn, though, are lessons about race and social class that we can spend a lifetime shaking off.

Around the corner Locke opens the conversation by putting the shape of a slave auction block at the center of concentric-square color studies à la Josef Albers, in a series of small acrylics he calls his “Homage to the Auction Block.” Thinking about “color” without reference to race is a luxury not everyone gets in our society. But you don’t have to throw out Albers or his “Homage to the Square” to say so. We can keep it all — and in fact, Modernism will only look sharper if, like Locke, we’re honest about its shadow.

Hilary Pecis and Becky Suss, young artists working in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, respectively, both paint well-ordered interiors with plenty of books and no people. Their paintings are similar enough to cause a moment of confusion when hung together. But while Pecis’s work is lush and expressive, Suss’s is drier and more prim, and the differences are enough, when you encounter them one after the other, to set up an entrancing visual dissonance. You see how much context changes a painting’s effect, and how it can even transform what might otherwise have seemed like definitive statements. Both painters look better in the other’s company.

When Suss’s painting “Behind the A-Z (Set vs. Isis/Nefertiti)” faces Sanford Biggers’s “God Whistle,” on the other hand, what happens is different. By itself, Biggers’s sculpture, a Renaissance-style marble figure with a head like an African mask, is a comment on European appropriation of African art in the early 20th century, and on the erasure of Black faces and culture. But the ancient figures on Suss’s canvas made me think of American Afrocentrists appropriating ancient Egyptian history, too.

One thing that makes our public discussions about race and identity frustrating is how quickly everyone is reduced to a single term. Efforts to diversify museums often fail in a similar way, making superficial additions without really involving their existing collections. But with juxtapositions like these, Molesworth offers a more robust example of inclusion, one that brings out the diversity of individuals as well as of the group. Biggers is a Black artist making a comment about European art history, but he’s also, like Suss, who is white, an American drawing on global art history for his own contemporary aesthetic ends. Suss’s painting, which pictures a small classical sculpture along with an Egyptian god and queen, was actually inspired by a children’s book. But the images, wherever she got them, inevitably have larger resonances.

Not all the work in “Feedback” is equally strong, though it’s all pulled along by the tide of Molesworth’s overall idea. But Karon Davis’s paperwhite sculptures of Black girls jumping rope, made with plaster bandages over steel armatures, deserve mention, as do Dana Sherwood’s strange feminist fantasias, drawings and paintings of naked women posed, along with idyllic living-room sets, in the bellies of enormous animals. Christina Forrer contributes reliably terrific tapestries and drawings, their dreamy figurative imagery lifted from some Grimm Brothers anthology, and from Cauleen Smith, who lives and works in Los Angeles, come eye-grabbing neon wall works and two quietly brilliant videos.

In one, “Orange Jumpsuit,” Smith painstakingly arranges a bouquet of orange flowers while wearing a blue jumpsuit. Then she leaves the bouquet on the sidewalk in front of the Los Angeles County Men’s Jail. Blue and orange are complementary colors, and I found myself wondering about the relationship of her costume to the orange bouquet, and to the orange jumpsuits of the men in jail. As I wandered around the show, I struggled to articulate its animating insight. Something about race, America, and living in contradiction. In the last room I came upon Kerry James Marshall’s “Ecce Homo” (2008-2014), which shows a young Black man in a serious pose. He wears a diamond earring, a dollar-bill ring and, around his neck, a gigantic golden chain. The title — “behold the man,” Pontius Pilate’s words, in Vulgate Latin, as he displayed Jesus to the angry crowd — evokes Western culture’s oldest and best known story of a man transmuting persecution into glory. Marshall is also continuing a well-traveled theme in Medieval and Renaissance art history, making both the Christ story and the art history alive to the position of Black Americans now. The key to this is the chain, a burdensome restraint repurposed as an ornament and then made even heavier by casting it in gold.