



Don't necessarily expect to understand much at a glance. A piece by Rebecca Belmore, an Anishinaabe artist from Canada, "ishkode (fire)" (2021), centers on a representation of a sleeping bag, cast in clay, that appears to cocoon a standing figure not otherwise in evidence. Surrounding it, on the floor, are thousands of small-calibre bullet casings intermixed with copper wire. It is beautiful both before you speculate on its thematic aim and after. I single it out for the glory of painstaking design that typifies scores of works in the show. I fancy that pandemic isolation, at once depriving and disburdening artists of career exigencies, has fostered lonely cultivations of perfection. The Biennial's title this year, "Quiet as It's Kept," is that of a 1960 Max Roach album, and was subsequently employed in Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye," in 1970, and for a show that was curated in 2002 by David Hammons, the New York provocateur in many mediums. The phrase befits art that, emerging from a spell of obscurity, is as insistent as an unexpected tap on the shoulder.

Perfect, as a matter of course, are figures, placed outdoors on a fifth-floor terrace, by the commanding Californian sculptor Charles Ray. Hand-formed and then cast or machined in metal, three outsized, seated men—unprepossessing, regular guys, by the look of them—impose a force field of held-breath aesthetic tension and laconic pathos. A few other established stars on hand and in good form include Alfredo Jaar, Ellen Gallagher, Jane Dickson, Nayland Blake, and the late Jason Rhoades. But the bulk of the Biennial is devoted to artists unfamiliar to me, whose outputs run the gamut from hanging fabrics to compact narratives. Of incidental note is proof that video art, after nearly half a century of self-conscious experimentation, has come of age: a camera is as second-nature and ready to hand for many artists now as a pencil or a paintbrush. The scant paintings on view reverse an emphasis on figurative imagery in the 2019 Biennial, tilting toward a lately prevalent revival of abstraction in perfervid styles that have yet to demonstrate staying power.

A collection of photographic works by the Laos-born artist Pao Houa Her both document and poeticize her Hmong family and community in North America. There are fifty-two of the images, and none too many. The sense of an intricately braided history, unfolding in the present while irradiated by memory, left me with an appetite for still more. Such gestation in personal testimony, distanced aesthetically, is another frequent tone of the show. It infuses a poem by the mystically inclined N. H. Pritchard, a Caribbean-parented New Yorker who was steeped in art history, and was a member of the Umbra Poets Workshop, a group of Black writers who met on the Lower East Side in the nineteen-sixties. He died in 1996, at the age of fifty-six. "Red Abstract / fragment" (1968-69) is a lyrical verse text typewritten on a brushy red ground and scribbled with restive cross-outs, revisions, and notes. Its meanings dance at the edge of comprehension, but with infectious improvisatory rhythms.

The quality of personhood turned inside out sings in a poignant film by the South Korean-born Berkeley graduate Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, which is projected on translucent cloth and includes haunting portraits—eyes closed alternating with eyes open—of the artist and of a sister of hers. In 1982, at the age of thirty-one, Cha, a tremendously erudite linguistic philosopher (concerned, she wrote, with "the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue") and novelist as well as artist, was raped and murdered in New York, at the Puck Building, by a security guard. She figures in the Biennial as a too-little-recognized progenitor of ideas and forms that are still in play for art and nowhere near exhausted.

It's not new for the Biennial to include deceased artists who seem relevant to present creative tendencies. The show has served, traditionally, not only to update the public on the state of contemporary art—mostly American, of course, that being a mandate emblazoned in the museum's name—but also to propose benchmarks and challenges for upcoming generations, even by welcoming some foreign talents of local note. What sets this edition apart, for me, is the determined consistency of its taste in this respect, which avoids the baggy eclecticism that has enfeebled some years' exhibitions. (Will our city's art people love the result? Nah. Hating the Biennial is practically a civic duty, or a pledge of un-allegiance, for cognoscenti hereabouts—and bless us for that, as it fuels the contrarian passion that makes New Yorkers crave to be better than . . . well, whatever you've got.)

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I won't forget the shock of learning Cha's terrible fate. I was assailed by it, having first discovered and savored her work—stumbling from delight to horror in a few minutes. But the delight abides. Where art is concerned, death need be no more than an inconvenience, and, as in the case of Pritchard, being all but invisible may turn out to have been merely a speed bump.

Even among the living, death broods here and there in the catacomb-like sixth-floor rooms, where it finds explicit reference in my favorite work in the show. Indelibly disturbing and enthralling, "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word" (2021), by the veteran Cuban American artist and singularly plainspoken social activist Coco Fusco, is a gorgeous twelve-minute video exploration of Hart Island—New York's potter's field for unidentified or unclaimed corpses. Shots of the artist laboring in a rowboat along its shores are intercut with drone overviews of a really quite lovely place where rows of small stone markers perfunctorily memorialize innumerable lost lives. Beauty stands in for unconsummated mourning. The work can seem to invoke the cascading fatalities of the covid pandemic and, by chance, the remorseless current carnage in Ukraine, whereby the destruction of so many people occasions news headlines as sullen as those stones. To be alive now is to be overwhelmed by a consciousness of the untimely dead, who, in Ukraine, have resigned their parts in a drama of ever more urgent military, political, and humanitarian imperatives. Their silence roars.

On a far less dire but, in itself, weirdly elegiac note is "64,000 Attempts at Circulation" (2021), by the young Queens artist Rose Salane. It consists of tables heaped with incredibly various slugs—metal washers, casino and arcade tokens, religious medals, play money, and what all—that were used as counterfeit bus fare in New York between 2017 and 2019. (Salane acquired them at a Metropolitan Transit Authority auction of unwanted assets.) Call the content misdemeanor populism, representing in each instance the recourse of someone motivated by need or only petty cupidity. Most of those folks, if not including (shh!) ourselves, still walk among us, mute testifiers to the cussedness of humanity chafing at the constraints of law. The disconcertingly handsome ensemble drolly epitomizes this Biennial's predominant detour, for now, from exalting autonomous art to braving the routine chaos of a world where no kind of comfort or conviction can be sure to persist from one day to the next.