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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, 6 days a week, standing on a podium like a gold medal winner. Alex Welsh for The New York Times.

By Holland Cotter
Aug. 16, 2018

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.
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 millenniums, 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.

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

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.

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.

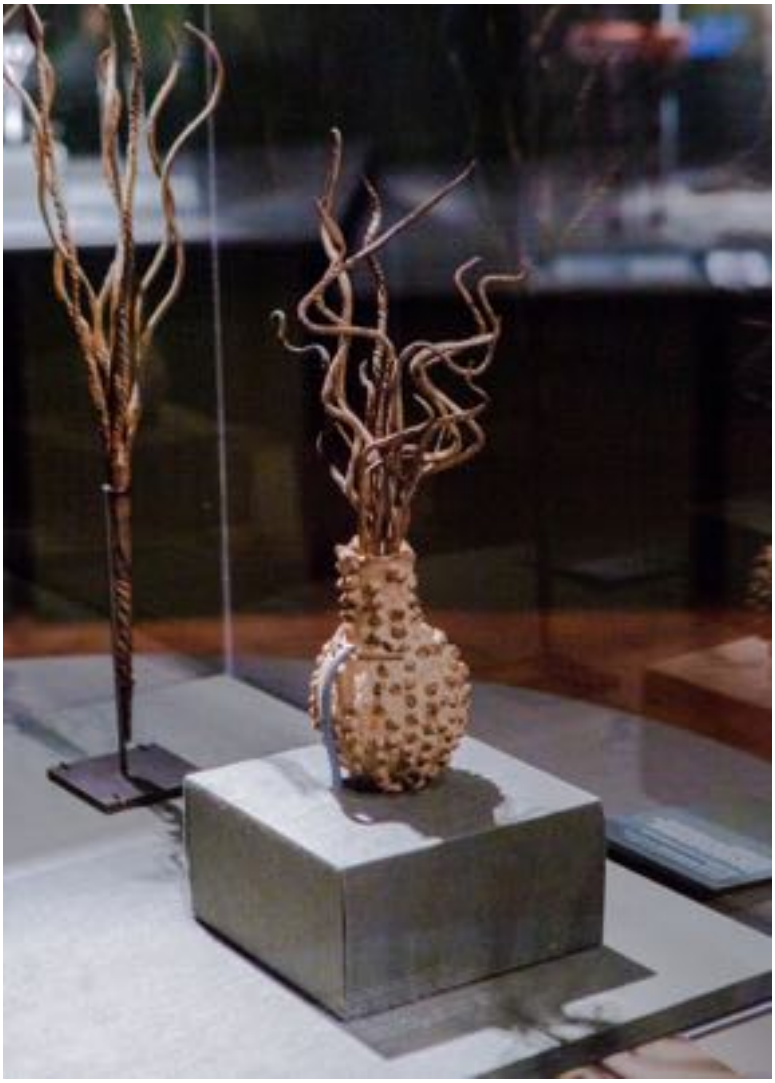
'Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths'
Fowler Museum at U.C.L.A.

Visitors examine bar currencies from northeastern Nigeria at the exhibition "Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths" at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Adding to a Los Angeles museum winning streak, "Striking Iron" at the Fowler Museum is the most beautiful sculpture show in recent memory. The Fowler is a smallish museum of global cultural history on the University of California, Los Angeles campus.

Under the direction of Marla C. Berns, it's one of the most consistently interesting art spaces in town. "Striking Iron" is a characteristic product: unfamiliar material, passionately researched, utterly gorgeous.
Assembled by a team of five curators — Allen F. Roberts, William J. Dewey, Henry J. Drewal, and Ms. Berns, and led by the artist Tom Joyce, a sculptor and former blacksmith — the show opens with an expansive picture of iron as an essential cosmic matter: It's in the earth's soil, in the human blood stream and courses through sub-Saharan African history. Extracted by processes physically so extreme as to seem mystical, iron can exhibit wildly contradictory properties: incorruptible durability, unearthly delicacy.

Ritual sickles are mythical creatures with bristling manes at the exhibition "Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths" at the Fowler Museum.
Alex Welsh for The New York Times



Vessels with clusters of “rain-wands” in the exhibition
“Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths”
at the Fowler Museum. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

And the forms it can take seem endlessly inventive, even those made for everyday use. A knife forged by a 19th-century Yanzi blacksmith in the Democratic Republic of Congo has a gentle flower-blossom shape. The perforated blade of a Luba ax looks spider-web fine. Forging tools can be sculptures in themselves: tongs like lithe figures, hammers as sleekly abstract as Brancusis.

And when tools are released from the realm of labor and conceived for ceremonial use they can be even more fantastic: A ritual sickle is a mythical creature with a bristling mane; a double hoe suggests the distilled essence of “elephant,” all trunk and ears. An herbalist’s staff trails a flock of tiny, fluttering, tissue-thin iron birds. A cluster of sinuous “rain-wands” looks both like a cloud of sacrificial smoke going up and an answering shower of water coming down.

In an alluring installation designed by Sebastian Clough, the show moves through a spectrum of iron's traditional applications in Africa: to the making of elaborate portable altars; precision-tooled weapons; musical instruments, forms of currency, some colossal. In many cases, perceived value lay in the quality of material and smithing skill. But sheer visual inventiveness — the kind that makes you just stop and look, and look — must always have been a primary factor.

For a contemporary audience it certainly is. I can't believe that young artists won't be knocked out by this stuff; not just by the look of it, but by objects believed to be spirit-channeling and interactively alive. One of the very few major exhibitions of African art in the country this season, the show should pull major crowds here and in Washington, when it travels there next year. It would have been a perfect fit — in material, size, everything — for the late Museum for African Art in New York. But with that institution gone, and nothing replacing it, and no one else jumping in, New York loses out.

'In the Fields of Empty Days'
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Detail of Yasmin Sinai's sculpture "The Act of Gurdafarid" in the show "In the Field of Empty Days" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has an exhibition that's hard to imagine being done, at least on the same scale and in the same unorthodox style, in any other big American museum. For the past several years LACMA has been assiduously buying contemporary Iranian art and now has the largest collection in the country. Selections from it make up the bulk of a major show — 125 works — called "In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art."

One of its themes is how political power is embodied in archetypical figures — the hero, the saint — and how those figures, as seen in art, change over time. The earliest images here are illustrations for the "Book of Kings," Iran's national epic. In the book, rulers come and go, but the central figure, the one who sets its moral tone, is the warrior named Rostam. He's a model of moral and physical strength; in a 17th-century manuscript painting we see him gleefully dispatching a devil with his bare hands.

Near that painting hangs a contemporary piece, a digital print from the 2009 series Rostam in Late Summer — Revisited by Fereydoun Ave. The Rostam figure here will be instantly familiar to modern Iranians: it's the wrestler Abbas Jadidi, who won the silver medal in the 1996 Olympics. In the print he stands, massively flexing — the image is lifted from a press photo — against a ground of giant roses.

What's interesting here is not so much the notion that an ancient ideal of strong-arm heroism has been Pop-ified and degraded, but that the ideal survives, even thrives, in what we sometimes consider a more enlightened present.

The show — organized by Linda Komaroff, curator of Islamic Art — doesn't say this directly. In fact, it says nothing directly at all. The galleries are all but bare of explanatory labels. (There are a few informational touch screens halfway through.) Ordinarily, I'd find this lack of history or commentary disturbing, perverse. But here silence works because so much of the art — and particularly the new art, by Pouya Afshar, Shoja Azari, Ramin Haerizadeh, Malekeh Nayiny, Yasmin Sinai, Newsha Tavakolian — is so strong. You may not understand details of specific narratives, but you clearly see that there *are* narratives, old and new, and that they're related, that they're about the drama of power clashes and the violent emotions they can stir.

Only the visual language changes. The most extensively depicted historical figure here is Shah Naser al-Din (1831-1896), largely because he introduced photography to Iran and sat for the camera a lot. He ruled for nearly 50 years, did some modernizing, but pandered to Europe, ignored corruption in his own regime and was finally assassinated. Official images of him on view reveal little of any of this. Most show a stiff, reserved, inexpressive, sword-bearing figurehead, a version, only slightly updated, of an antique icon of imperial might.

But we see quite a different Naser al-Din in a 2009 series of digital prints by the Iranian artist Siamak Filizadeh. Using actors and elaborate sets, Mr. Filizadeh presents the story of the ruler's life as a phantasmagoria of kink and corruption, and the Shah himself as a shameless, let-it all-hang-out clown. The images are beyond sendup. They're a pointedly

flipped version of old power. The ruler's a failure, — but he's also a winner because now he's a big personality, a folk hero, a star! The images, old and new, say it all.

Chances are good that I'm not going to encounter as offbeat an exercise in art-as-history in any other museum anywhere soon. Maybe they're only likely to happen with any regularity in a place where art institutions and their conventions are still in a healthy state of flux. I'm glad I caught the show here.

Correction: *August 16, 2018*

An earlier version of this review misspelled the surname of an artist. She is Christina Quarles, not Quales.

Made in L.A. 2018
Through Sept. 2 at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; 310-443-7000, hammer.ucla.edu.

Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths
Through Dec. 30 at the Fowler Museum UCLA, 310-825-4361, fowler.ucla.edu. (Travels to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington and then to the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris.)

In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art
Through Sept. 9 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; 323-857-6000, lacma.org.

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