ARTFORUM

Greater New York

MOMA PS1

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View of Greater New York, 2015–16. From left: Judith Shea, *Easy Does It*, 2014; Jeffrey Gibson, *Burn for You*, 2014; Red Grooms, *Mr. Universe*, 1990; Mary Beth Edelson, *Kali Bobbit*, 1994; Ignacio Gonzalez-Lang, *Kueens*, 2009; John Ahearn, *Maria and Her Mother*, 1987. Photo: Pablo Enriquez.

AFTER BECOMING a part of the Museum of Modern Art in 2000, MoMA PS1 began presenting a big-tent, building-wide exhibition called Greater New York, which surveys artistic practices in the city every five years. Though ostensibly referring to its reach across the five boroughs, the title has always struck me as rather triumphalist in tone. I mean, New York is the greatest city in the world, right? And Greater New York's function has typically seemed to be one of rounding up the best and the brightest from the city's MFA programs and priming their goods for the market. With the exhibition's fourth installation, however, a curatorial team comprising MoMA PS1's Peter Eleey, the art historian Douglas Crimp, and curators Thomas Lax and Mia Locks has gone against the grain, producing a "lesser," perhaps even "minor," exhibition. Taking the city itself as subject, the show examines margins, micro-economies, and silenced voices through myriad media. Fia Backström's *lesser new york*, 2005, an archive of downtown ephemera from the early aughts, proclaims such a position in its title, but other works, such as Cameron Rowland's *Loot*, 2014, a mail crate full of copper pipe stripped from abandoned buildings, articulate the city as a site of salvage and precarity more suggestively. One gets the feeling walking through this show that the periphery has never been so great, or at least so visible, as it is today.

Another factor in Greater New York's changed tone (or is it a mood?) is the exhibition's historical sweep. This installment shows not just young artists but many who have played an integral part in the city's cultural life since MoMA PS1's founding in 1976. Much of the work from the 1970s, including Alvin

Baltrop's black-and-white photographs of queer life on the West Side piers and James Nares's astounding film *Pendulum*, 1976, which depicts a wrecking ball swinging through an empty street in Lower Manhattan, has been imported from "Mixed Use Manhattan," Crimp's 2010 exhibition at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, curated with Lynne Cooke. The show catalogued the various ways in which run-down areas of Manhattan have historically been put to use, not the least of which are mystery, subversion, and sex. The presence of such material in an exhibition usually devoted to "contemporary" art provides a measuring stick by which to gauge the city's changes while also serving to project such a spirit into the future.

At the same time, the inclusion of this historical work seems symptomatic of our larger cultural moment. Indeed, in the past few years, our sense of the contemporary has begun to expand to include not only that which is newly made but that which is still with us, a shift that has opened the door to all sorts of objects being shown in "contemporary" exhibitions, including artifacts, documents, and relics. This tendency parallels, and often works in tandem with, a resurgent interest in things, materials, and affects, a trend often manifesting in a predilection for densely worked objects. The 2012 installment of the Whitney Biennial, with its emphasis on the handmade and crafted, was a signature event in this regard, and many of the works in this year's Greater New York, such as Robert Bordo's muted semiabstractions, Gina Beavers's built-up paintings of animal meat and human bodies, and Kevin Beasley's concave relief of house dresses, would have felt at home in that exhibition. The 2012 Biennial's insistence on the centrality of performance is also doubled here, and to similar effect. More than a third of the artists included in the exhibition are showing in the performance and film programs, which have been staggered—a day here, an afternoon there—throughout the run of the exhibition. Such a structure makes any comprehensive review of the exhibition all but impossible, but more important, it imagines its audience less as visitors to a show and more as members of a community, one constituted in time as well as space. The curators' decision to release occasional pamphlets instead of a comprehensive catalogue would also seem to privilege the idea that the museum can be a space of gestation and process rather than simply a site of display.

For all its commitment to community, the exhibition's emphatic interest in things and materiality and its turn to the handmade and the idiosyncratic frequently dovetails, rather strikingly, with the logic of retail, and that ur-thing, the commodity. Nancy Shaver has laid out an installation that pairs her variegated bricolaged sculptures with a sundry assortment of found objects, including a framed and folded pajama top, hook rugs, spindles, and a yellow shovel. Her spread has all the faded wonder of a rummage sale, and it's not surprising to learn that she operates a *Wunderkammer*-like store in Hudson, New York, where the items for sale have a similarly touched and curated feel. Putting a finer point on this theme, the curators have turned over a significant amount of gallery space to a project called KIOSK, whose proprietors scour the globe for simple, cute, and colorful products and resell them at museum gift shops and online. (Begun in 2005, the company maintained a second-floor space in SoHo until 2014.) I know from experience what great gifts these things can be (full disclosure: I own the white watch from Greece!), but KIOSK's inclusion still baffles, seeming to foreclose the possibility that art might generate alternative economies, even as it highlights the commercial formats of other projects, such as Susan Cianciolo's RUN fashion collections from the 1990s, represented here by a variety of handmade outfits, pieced-together books, and lo-fi fashion videos. While giving Shaver's upstate sensibility a downtown feel, the logic is similar, transforming standard commodities into one-of-a-kind things.

Interestingly, the most explicit embrace of contemporary fashion in Greater New York—a display of recent projects by the design duo Eckhaus Latta—clarifies another of the exhibition's primary themes: the return of the figure in contemporary art. A parade of tank tops with printed pictures of chests, breasts, aureoles, and nipples, variously pierced and protruding, lines one of MoMA PS1's long hallways, facing off with a row of mannequins wearing colorful painted-cotton garments made by the designers in collaboration with the artist Annabeth Marks. Interesting on its own terms (the walls themselves are painted a peachy flesh color), this installation would have been better placed in proximity to the large room on the second floor where eighteen riffs on the human figure stand and slump across the space. From John Ahearn's rendering of a familial embrace (*Maria and Her Mother*, 1987) to Elizabeth Jaeger's coupling Caucasians (*Maybe We Die So the Love Doesn't Have To*, 2015), from Huma Bhabha's stern totem (*Constantium*, 2014) to Stewart Uoo's scorched torso (*No Sex, No City: Miranda III*, 2013), the diversity of these figures and the basic theme that unifies them create a picture not totally dissimilar to that old midcentury bogeyman of an exhibition "The Family of Man," first staged at MoMA in 1955. For all of today's talk about

cyborgs and posthumans, this room suggests that a deep-seated humanism is still at work in the cultural imaginary, but that it has become both multicultural and postapocalyptic at once. What are the limits of the human? the room seems to ask. Perhaps the logic structuring this gallery is not wholly different from that of KIOSK's display: The world is a grab bag. See what fits you best.

This said, the rubric of the exhibition remains the city, then and now. Architecture and urbanism provide the frame, as exemplified by works such as Roy Colmer's photographic archive of city doors (selections from "Doors, NYC," 1975–76) and Ajay Kurian's cynical diorama of a city skyline made from vape gear (*Comfort Zone #3 [Heaven is for smokers and non-smokers]*, 2014). Read in tandem, works such as these tell a now-familiar story of financialization and gentrification, of a shift of power from the public interest to a private fortified realm. Perhaps the most successful works to mine this vein are Nick Relph's new group of digital collages, which are based on the architectural renderings that adorn the barriers surrounding New York construction sites. Using a handheld scanner, Relph made a glitchy digital record of these pictures of soon-to-be-completed buildings, capturing the dirt and grime that have adhered to their surfaces. Printed out as glossy large-scale photographs, the works leave one with questions. Why are the photos the size they are? What might they have looked like had Relph returned them to their barricade-like supports and wrapped them around the room? The content intrigues, but the works' display feels lacking.

In this respect, Louise Lawler's work appears as one of the most intelligent interventions in the show, telling with the utmost clarity the story of displacement and distortion that the exhibition wants to narrate. Two of her massive photographic prints have been installed in a large, high-ceilinged, and otherwise empty gallery on MoMA PS1's third floor and stretched to fit the dimensions of their site. *Not Yet Titled (adjusted to fit)*, 2004/2005/2015, depicts Gordon Matta-Clark's 1974 sculpture *Bingo*, a slice of a suburban house, installed in discordantly white-walled galleries at MoMA, across the river in Manhattan. In a certain sense, Lawler's photo is thus another nod to the past; other works by Matta-Clark appear throughout the show, and he is among the artists on view who best represent MoMA PS1's early DIY spirit. If Lawler's photograph brings Matta-Clark from the anodyne environs of MoMA back to PS1, however, it also makes clear that such maneuvers are never straightforward. Stuck like a massive sticker on the institution's walls, the photo presents itself as simply one more permutation of a digital file. As such, her work offers an implicit critique of our long-standing submission to the aura of artifacts, to the belief that they are imbued with the capacity to put us into contact with the authenticity of history despite the variety of displacements to which they are inevitably subjected. Perhaps Lawler's knowingly warped image of history is the clearest picture of "greater" New York we have at the moment. As the city plows headlong into one redevelopment project after another, the past, with its chipped molding and exposed laths, does not sit stably in an archive; not only things but also the ways we see them have been bent virtually beyond recognition. But the work of the present is not to straighten things out—it is to stretch them yet again.

Greater New York is on view through Mar. 7.

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