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Fresh Riffs on a Theme

Using works in the Getty's collection as sources of inspiration, 11 artists create highly energetic projects for 'Departures' that crackle with power linking the past to the present.

Art Review

By DAVID PAGEL
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“**D**epartures: 11 Artists at the Getty” stands out as a landmark exhibition for one simple reason: It puts art front and center.

Forget about the fact that the Getty rarely exhibits works by living artists. This is not what distinguishes this highly stimulating, deeply satisfying show from previous presentations of commissioned works inspired by the august institution's impressive (if uneven) holdings. What marks “Departures” as groundbreaking is the vividness with which it taps into the high-voltage vitality running through individual works of art in the museum's collection.

Since it is impossible to *see* this electrifying energy, many critics and curators—and even some artists—assume that it is merely a mythical aura conjured by omnipotent institutions, in order to lull viewers into false piety and numbed complacency. You can, however, *feel* the power that positively crackles between these 11 artists' recently completed projects and the historical works that served as their points of departure.

Take Lari Pittman's mural-scale painting that celebrates stylish vulgarity, as if these contrary attributes were two peas in a pod. It depicts a whirlwind of heads, houses and hookahs. After you've been bedazzled—or appalled—by the disconcerting visual gymnastics of this high-octane homage to cosmopolitan consciousness, walk across the Getty's marble-clad courtyard to see James Ensor's similarly outrageous 1888 painting, “Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889.”

Brash, overwrought and overloaded with garish details that refuse to behave in the manner of a serious Modern painting, this in-your-face picture of a banner-strewn street bursting with politicians dressed as buffoons and citizens dolled up like animals serves as a perfect godfather to Pittman's hallucinatory image.

Titled “Indebted to you, I will have had understood the power of the wand over the scepter,” Pittman's dizzying orchestration of interpenetrating emblems uses pronouns to simultaneously address its artistic source and its audience. It insists that art's enchanting magic is more important than the authority of the context in which it is found.

Like Pittman, Sharon Ellis and Alison Saar use cartoons to re-envision the world. Ellis' fabulously beautiful painting depicts a rocky hillside covered with four leafless trees and a cluster of translucent flowers.

which seem to be swimming like liquid jellyfish in the brittle sunlight. Based on paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, a photograph by William Henry Fox Talbot and the Getty's lush garden, Ellis' fantasy-saturated realism engages its sources in the most traditional manner of any of the works here. She demonstrates that doing things the old-fashioned way is neither conservative nor outdated—provided you've got the talent and moxie to go toe-to-toe with past masters.

This is just what Saar's rough-hewn, roughly life-size figure does. Casually standing in a tin washbasin, her metal-skinned nude strikes a pose similar to that of the famous Lansdowne Hercules, the Getty's Roman copy of an ancient Greek sculpture.

Her approachable, homemade deity refers both to Aphrodite, the ocean-born goddess of Western mythology, and to Yemaya, the mother goddess of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, fusing the two in a statuesque female whose feet are firmly planted in a portable pedestal that brings backyard familiarity inside the museum's hallowed halls. Mimicking the walk-softly-and-carry-a-big-stick stance of Hercules, Saar's "Afro-Di(e)ty" draws as much strength from what's not in the Getty's collections as what is.

The artists selected for "Departures" by guest curator Lisa Lyons have chosen nothing but major works as springboards. This measures the high level of their ambitions and reveals what artists always do when they visit museums: Seek out the best to see what they can get from it.

Art conveys ideas in ways not limited to rational explanations and not best accounted for in footnoted treatises. A fascinating aspect of "Departures" is that it gives viewers the opportunity to watch 11 hard-working artists use their heads and hands to think things through.

The catalog, which is a pleasure to read, is packed with information and insights. Since it went to press long before any of the works were completed, it focuses on the decisions each artist made as they chose their points of departure and moved on from there, sometimes taking cautious baby-steps and at other times embarking on mind-boggling flights of fancy. In both the show and the catalog, Lyons shows herself to be a sensitive, clear-sighted guide to the ordinarily over-mythologized creative process.

If you think that museums have more in common with mausoleums than entertainment centers, you'll also be surprised by how much fun "Departures" is. Which isn't to say its artists aren't serious, just that they're multifaceted individuals whose works reflect human complexity.

Slapstick comedy gets your attention in works by John Baldessari and Martin Kersels, before the deeper ideas flowing beneath their surfaces catch you in their undertow. By blowing up Albrecht Dürer's tiny drawing of a stag beetle to monstrous proportions and sticking it to the wall with a saber-size pushpin, Baldessari physically demonstrates that art is a living organism, as susceptible to death as any other.

Kersels has had a Styrofoam copy made of the infamous Getty Kouros, a marble sculpture of an idealized young man (who wears a grin more mischievous than beatific). The smartest scholars in the world have failed to determine whether the statue was carved in Greece in 530 BC or is a forgery made sometime last century.

In four hefty Cibachromes, the 350-pound, 6-foot-6-inch Kersels bounces off a trampoline while clutching the Styrofoam stunt double. Sometimes suspended in mid-air and sometimes crashing into the shrubbery, the mismatched partners enact a dance oddly appropriate to the uncertainty at the heart of the grinning Kouros.

Dry wit, both barbed and gentle, animates Judy Fiskin's videotape, "My Getty Center," with its newsy reflections on art's place in Southern California. Deftly traveling from TV news reports of El Niño to a docent's dumbed-down analysis of a painting by Canaletto, Fiskin's loopy docudrama ends with a vision of the Getty Center drifting off to the South Seas as the "Hukilau" song invites viewers to sing along. Rubén Ortiz Torres' 3-D music video transforms a ballad by his father into a syncopated samba that layers political history atop personal memories: A dancing lowrider, built from the same model Chevrolet driven by Che Guevara in Cuba, causes sparks to fly by linking south-of-the-border socialist revolution to Middle American upward mobility.

Similarly over-the-top in their exuberant embrace of finely finished decorative flourishes are Adrian Saxe's five vessels set atop an 18th century French table and two rhinestone-studded oil lamps perched on a pair of 10-foot-tall torchiers. With toy action figures representing Austin Powers and Dennis Rodman mounted on their covers, his oversized gewgaws in porcelain, stoneware and plastic demonstrate that good manners and bad taste often go hand in hand.

Marrying the sublime to the ridiculous, Stephen Prina's hauntingly beautiful film is a masterpiece, the most engaging, multilayered work he has made. Proving himself to be a gifted composer, a talented director and an endearingly ordinary singer, Prina links Georges de la Tour's "The Musicians' Brawl" to Gerrit van Honthorst's "Christ Crowned With Thorns" in ways that only art can.

Uta Barth and John M. Miller also present astonishingly beautiful installations that show each of them in top form. Barth's photographs of golden sunlight passing through the sparsely furnished living room of her Mar Vista home give sensuous form to the experience of time slowing down, as ideas slip out of nowhere into consciousness.

Likewise, Miller's magnificent paintings take time as their subject. Titled "Prophecy," "Sanctum" and "Atonement," the abstract trio cannot be read from left to right or vice versa. Each embodies its own chronology: The first, painted golden ochre, suggests an anticipated event; the third uses blood-red to bear witness to attempts to make peace with past transgressions; and, the middle one, with black and violet panels framing a central section of pristine white, rivets viewers right where they stand.

To emphasize that his work is about intensity, not size, Miller has chosen a 15th century illuminated manuscript by Jean Fouquet to give viewers an idea of the intimacy his art requires. The small, hand-held diptych links heavenly perfection to earthy yearning in an impossible moment of embodied transcendence. Such departures from everyday drudgery and suffering are as rare today as they were 500 years ago, and should not be missed—especially when they're presented so clearly and consistently as in this rewarding exhibition.