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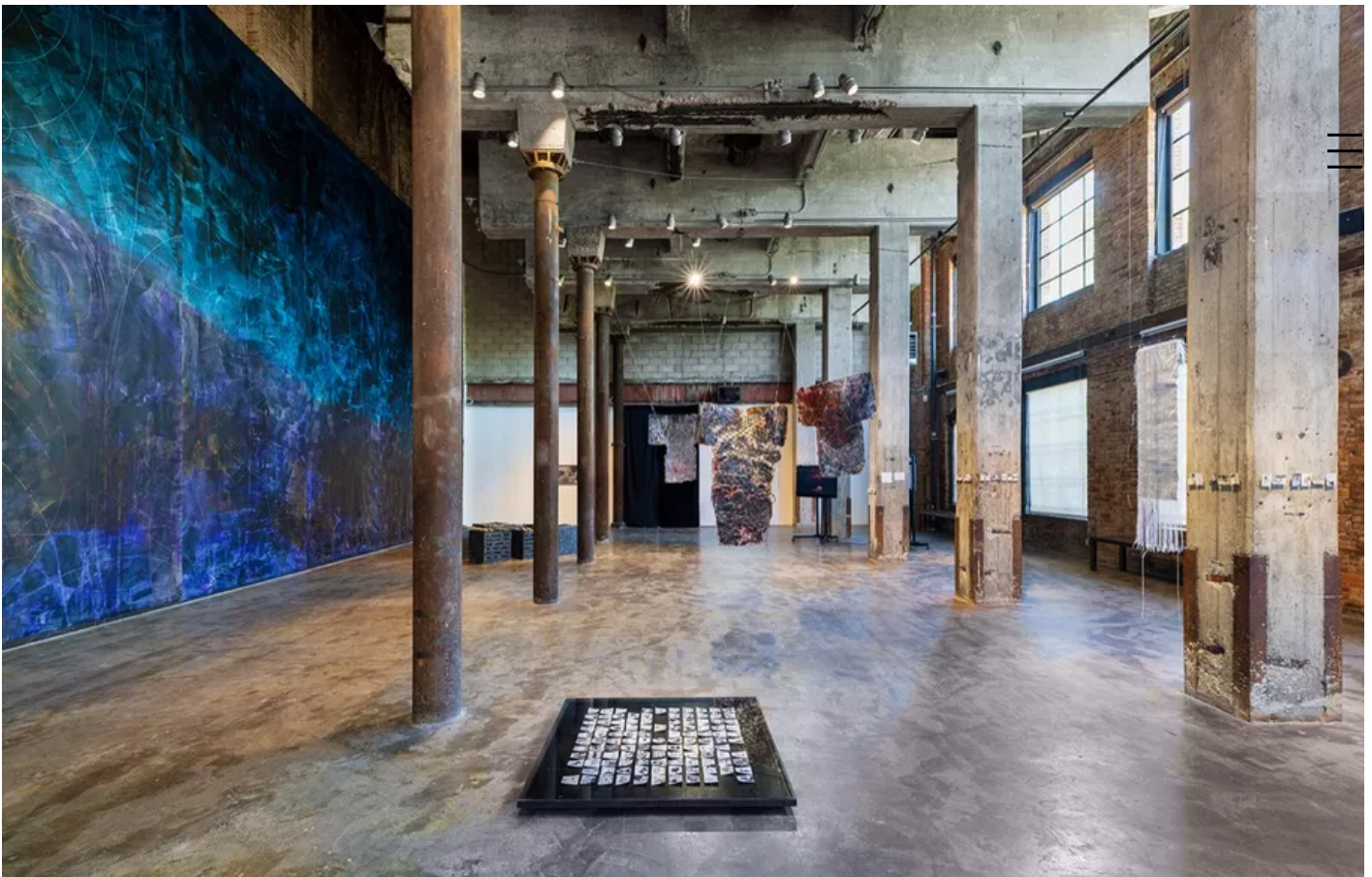
Art

With Spectacular Installations and Abstractions, Artists Redress Colonial Violence and History

Ayanna Dozier

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Installation view of “You’d Think By Now,” 2022 at Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

With an increase in police brutality, burgeoning restrictions on reproductive health care, and new legislation meant to silence queer and trans people, it’s becoming more difficult for many of us, especially marginalized folks, to place any trust in Western systems of governance. Out of these difficulties, these communities have developed alternative methods of communal (health) care and education, and such measures are now more necessary than ever. A new exhibition at Smack Mellon celebrates those overlooked contributions across several artists’ works.

“You’d Think By Now,” on view through August 7th, features work by Jesse Chun, Nicholas Grafia, Mikołaj Sobczak, Bang Geul Han, Kosuke Kawahara, Dawn Kim, Artistilde Kirby, Tariku Shiferaw, and Vanessa Thill. The dynamic, multidisciplinary group exhibition,

curated by Rachel Vera Steinberg, illustrates the detriments of policies that erase individuals at the margins of race, class, nationality, and gender—and ultimately calls for change.



“The exhibition responds to the destruction of the systems in which we live and [reflects] how those systems lose our trust,” Steinberg told Artsy. “[I wanted to] examine artists and artworks that are looking directly at systems of governance, media representation, and language to reject the ways available to solve them [in order] to construct a new path for [freedom].”

Installation view of Tariku Shiferaw, *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams*, 2022, in “You’d Think By Now,” at Smack Mellon. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Photo by Mycroft Zimmerman. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.



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While “You’d Think By Now” is a response to the political climate, the politics in the show can be quite subtle. Take, for instance, the inclusion of abstract painter and Artsy Vanguard 2021 honoree Shiferaw. His monumental installation *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams* (2022) examines Dogon's discoveries regarding

constellations and celestial bodies, which have been disregarded by the West.



A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams is the first exhibited work from Shiferaw's latest series "Mata Semay" (Amharic for "night skies"), and features seven towering 24-by-8-foot canvas panels, several ceramic crates that resemble wood, and a 23-minute audio featuring musical compositions from across the African diaspora. Shiferaw painted the colossal *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams* paintings over an eight-month period at the artist's studio space at Silver Arts Projects at the World Trade Center and at the New York City Culture Club.

Installation view of Tariku Shiferaw, *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams*, 2022, in "You'd Think By Now," at Smack Mellon. ©Tariku Shiferaw. Photo by Mycroft Zimmerman. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

The abstract canvases feature deep purple, blue, and black hues that evoke a nacreous night sky. On top, Shiferaw has layered precise geometric patterns that resemble star constellations. Shiferaw believes that abstraction can teach audiences to examine culture, telling Artsy that "by casting the constellations as ideas of history rather than a fact, I could examine how those ideas are passed down and inform other cultures and more thoroughly engage in the rich cultural exchange between Ethiopians and Black Americans."

Many Western audiences don't know that Dogon's star constellations predate Western Greek constellations by several thousand years. "Mata Semay" provokes them to reconsider what the West considers a scientific "discovery," while disregarding

Eastern ideas and advancements. *A Strange Place to Cast Our Dreams* advances a quiet, nuanced political argument, thinking about the geographical and cultural contours of Blackness — and its previously overlooked understandings of the universe.



Installation view of Vanessa Thill (left) *Petro Queen I*, 2017, *Drag Net Torso*, 2017, in “You’d Think By Now,” at Smack Mellon. ©Vanessa Thrill. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Claire Bergeal; Smack Mellon.

Installation view of Bang Geul Han, *Warp and Weft #03*, 2022, in “You’d Think By Now,” at Smack Mellon. ©Bang Geul Han. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

Moving from the cosmic to the linguistic, Han’s contribution includes a shawl woven from legal texts that target immigration and abortive care in the United States. The artist has shredded these documents to create something new. Han’s shawl and *Warp and Weft #02 - Reading* (2022) — an accompanying black-and-white photograph of the artist wearing a variation of the garment — reference the uphill battle towards safe abortive care for immigrant women of color, especially in the face of the Supreme Court’s recent overthrow of *Roe v. Wade*. By cutting up legal documents and weaving them together, Han literally creates an interlocking system, demonstrating how disparate laws affecting — and harming — racialized individuals are inextricably bound together.

At the center of the show, Vanessa Thill’s alluring installation *Drag Net Torso* (2017) elicits petrified flesh. The artist constructed her large-scale sculptures from such materials as fake blood and beauty products procured from discount retailers. Thill melts these objects to create a grotesque slush, then encases them in resin. The installation comments on both consumer culture and the body. “Thill asks: ‘What if everything lost its containers?’” said Steinberg. “All of these materials have a specific use and value, so what do we

do with all of these materials under late capitalism [when they are being consumed]?”



Installation view of Bang Geul Han, *Warp and Weft #02 - Reading*, 2022, in “You’d Think By Now,” at Smack Mellon.
©Bang Geul Han. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

While Shiferaw and Han address broad societal issues, *Drag Net Torso* evokes the fragility of the body and the materials that we consume. If “You’d Think By Now” evaluates the ways in which systems fail to protect its citizens, Thill takes the show’s arguments to a conclusion: After experiencing such failures, individuals can’t protect their own bodies from harm. They lose their personhood in the eyes of the state, simply becoming flesh.

“You’d Think by Now” also features immersive installations across mixed media, including moving photographs by Dawn Kim and video work by Jesse Chun and the artist duo Nicholas Grafia and Mikoaj Sobczak. The show galvanizes its audience to reconsider inequalities both historical and very bound up in contemporary policies. As Steinberg asserted, what we’re doing right now is not working, and “we need to move forward to ensure our survival.” ■

Ayanna Dozier

Ayanna Dozier is Artsy’s Staff Writer.

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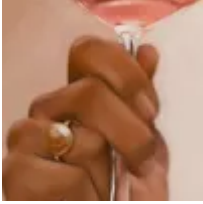


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