

Intelligent art by award recipients

By Charles Desmarais

Since 1967, nearly 200 of the brightest lights among Bay Area artists have been honored by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with its SECA Art Award, which comes with a museum show. Winnowed by an exhaustive process, the art is always worth attention. As an exhibition, this year's offering has got to be among the best.

Organized by Linde Lehtinen and Nancy Lim, SFMOMA assistant curators, the show opens Saturday, Nov. 16. It is a concise curatorial argument for art informed by visual intelligence, unbridled by academic theory or polemical posturing. It makes its case quietly, almost surreptitiously — self-confident but never self-satisfied.

The three artists honored this year, chosen from among 16 strong finalists, are Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Sahar Khoury and Marlon Mullen. All take a deeply personal approach to art that nonetheless resonates sympathetically with anyone who engages it.

There was a time when the SECA award was expected to go to an artist whose work had not received the attention of museums or commercial galleries. The pace of the contemporary art market these days, however, is such that all three artists have been shown in prestigious venues and are well-known among those who pay close attention to the scene.

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Marlon Mullen

"Untitled" is by Marlon Mullen, one of the artists in the SFMOMA show.

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There's a substantial upside to that situation, in that the artists were vetted even before the SECA curators began making their selections. What we have, then, is a show of work not by emerging artists, but by mid-career professionals, the oldest of whom is 56.

The elder in this group would be Mullen, who was invited to participate in the prestigious Whitney Biennial exhibition this year. Mullen is an artist whose autism may or may not be relevant to a remarkable talent; his ability to see structure and color where others might be limited by the implied logic of text, or the incidence of subject matter in a photograph.

Partial to art magazines and catalogs as source material, Mullen extracts a pictorial meaning from the illustrations, advertisements and covers that is beyond words. His pictures seem at first to describe something familiar but trap us, as if in a maze. To look at a Mullen painting is to see without the filter — or the protection — of a culture that most of us acquire second-hand.

Each artist is allotted a separate gallery in the museum. Hinkle announces her fiery take on colonial history in Africa even before we enter her space, with walls that glow a sanguinary red. The color carries through all the works, which range from foot-square abstractions with poetic titles ("Born of stories and rumors," "In his dormant sun"), to altered, greatly enlarged photographs and postcards suggesting contrast and conflict between native and colonist, to freely painted figures with collaged elements.



Don Ross

"Untitled (Studio Stool with Gold Luster Heart Charm)" is a 2019 work by Sahar Khory.



Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle

"The Sower Pt. II, from The Uninvited Series," a 2016 work by SECA award winner Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, in in the show.

"2019 SECA Art Award: Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Sahar Khoury, Marlon Mullen": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Tuesday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday. Saturday, Nov. 16-April 12. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

Nature is both raw and ritualized, taking the form of swarming snakes; abstract emblems, contained to small canvases one place, become hair ornaments in another. The entire installation of works, which the artist has dubbed "They," comprises a psychological space as well as a physical one.

At the center of the room stands a "mammy chair" of rattan, covered with coarse black fibers woven to suggest an elaborate hairstyle. A sculptural hybrid of colonial conveyance — another such chair is shown in a photo, swinging pith-helmeted men from ship to dock — and symbol of African pride, the piece is a key to Hinkle's reclamation of a past that was once imposed, but is now surreally shared.

Khoury, too, describes a world known only to her, using a vocabulary that is uniquely her own. As in past exhibitions, she uses conventional materials in idiosyncratic ways. She freely combines ceramic, papier-mâché and

cement forms, as if the art world had imposed on such techniques no hierarchy of effete decoration, hobbyist craft and sweaty labor. Where Hinkle is something of a mystic seer, Khoury is a blue-collar jester.

A wall label tells us she wants to call most of these sculptures "topiary," but without that clue we would not guess they stand for shaped hedges. "Untitled (Rebar Topiary)" is a dense structure that might be a model of a many-windowed apartment house, but with a cram of tangled iron bars rendering it uninhabitable.

"Untitled (Security Gate Topiary)" consists of fences, grates and gates. Their func-

tion is to hold: out, in, together.

The belt, as in the past, is a recurring theme. A belt is decoration, control, punishment. It is also, for Khoury, an elemental tool, used to bind sculptural parts.

And if a sculpture might need a nice belt to pull it together, well then why not a pair of earrings or a gold charm to accessorize? And if the charm turns out to be a heart of thorns, well, why did we expect better?

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