

BLOUINARTINFO

"Come As You Are": A '90s Flashback in New Jersey



Nikki S. Lee's "Punk Project (1)," 1997.
(© Nikki S. Lee/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

"Come As You Are," an exhibition of art from the 1990s on view at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey through May 17, is best approached as an eclectic, necessarily incomplete survey of a decade. (That characterization is also slightly inaccurate, since curator Alexandra Schwartz chooses the Berlin Wall's collapse and 9/11 as her two temporal poles.) The show proclaims a tripartite emphasis on "identity politics, the digital revolution, and globalization," and encompasses work in all media, including pieces that flirt with fashion (Andrea Zittel), industrial design (Jorge Pardo), animation (Marina Zurkow), and relational aesthetics (Rirkrit Tiravanija, Felix Gonzalez-Torres).

I was turning 9 the summer the Berlin Wall fell, so in many ways I did not "live through this," to borrow a 1994 line from Courtney, wife of Kurt, whose band unwittingly provided the title of this show. Yet much of the work here is familiar — which is not a bad thing, especially in light of the doubtlessly varied audience that this suburban New Jersey institution is used to reaching. "Come As You Are" opens with photographs by Catherine Opie and Gabriel Orozco, a comparatively tame cut-paper work by Kara Walker, and Andrea Fraser's classic "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk," 1989. From there, a short diversion through the museum's Rand Gallery of Native American Art is required. "Come As You Are" is dispersed non-sequentially throughout the institution, which results in a bit of cognitive dissonance, and makes it hard to fully settle into a decade-specific mindset. (The '90s rooms have walls helpfully painted turquoise, in case you get confused.)

The identity-politics angle is amply presented here, from Gary Simmons's chalkboard drawing to Byron Kim's gridded paintings of skin tones and Mendi + Keith Obadike's "Blackness for Sale," a literal attempt to hawk racial identity on eBay. The latter work is represented by a screenshot of the sale listing, before it was removed from the site. "This Blackness can be used for creating black art," it touts, before advising against anyone using said blackness in a legal setting, or while applying for a job. Similarly irreverent, barbed humor is at play in shape-shifting self-portraits by Nikki S. Lee, and an archived website by Prema Murthy, "Bindi Girl," a tongue-in-cheek sex-fetish site with a Southeast Asian spin. (The mouse used to navigate the site was resting on a pad depicting Edward Hopper's "Coast Guard Station," part of MAM's permanent collection, adding an extra, inadvertent level of strangeness.) While the Internet's influence is important for many of the artists here, including Mark Tribe and Mark Napier, there's also a decent amount of old-school painting — with small-scale work by Elizabeth Peyton, Karen Kilimnik, and an especially cool Laura Owens piece.

Other highlights include undersung Alex Bag's pitch-perfect video satire "Untitled Fall '95," 1995 (which comes with bean bag chairs and a white shag rug to enjoy it on), and "Braingirl," Marina Zurkow's quirky, proto-"Adult Swim" series of Macromedia Flash animations. "Famous Twins," 1993 — two giant-sized sweater-sculptures in crushed velvet and cotton by Beverly Semmes — predate similar work by Amanda Ross-Ho by two decades.

Some of the artists here — Julie Mehretu, Matthew Barney — are represented by small drawings or, in Barney's case, framed landscape photographs from "Cremaster 2" that might make little or no sense to anyone without further knowledge of the artist's work. As such, treat "Come As You Are" as a far-reaching survey intended for a broad audience: A place to start, rather than a definitive statement.