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Emilie L. Gossiaux and sonia louise davis Reviews: Sensory Experiences at the Queens Museum

A pair of intimate exhibitions make visitors consider sight, sound and touch.

By Brian P. Kelly

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Installation view of 'Emilie L. Gossiaux: Other-Worlding' at the Queens Museum PHOTO: QUEENS MUSEUM/HAI ZHANG

Queens, N.Y.

The Queens Museum is one of the trickier New York museums to visit, not in terms of sold-out tickets but due to its remote location. Most who make the pilgrimage to the penultimate stop on the 7 line, followed by a lengthy walk to the museum itself, inside Flushing Meadows Corona Park, do so to take in the awe-inspiring “Panorama of the City of New York,” an eye-wateringly detailed 1:1200 scale model conceived by Robert Moses for the 1964-65 World’s Fair and constructed over the course of three years (and which has been updated from time to time since then). But a pair of shows currently at the museum reveal that there’s more to be enjoyed here than Moses’s miniature metropolis.

These exhibitions are far more intimate than the museum’s crown jewel, human-scaled where that work casts us in an Olympian role (and perspective). They both stem from the QM-Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists, which awards a monetary prize, studio space and mentoring to early-career artists and concludes with a solo show. They’re also, each in its own way, deeply tied to the senses.

In “Other-Worlding,” a gallery-spanning installation, Emilie L. Gossiaux explores “disability” not as limitation but as a celebration of human capability in a paean to our differences. The artist, who is now 34 years old, lost her vision in 2010 after she was hit on her bike by a tractor trailer while a student at the Cooper Union. Here her guide dog, London, takes center stage. Rendered in papier-mâché, a trio of Londons on hind legs dance around a maypole, itself a giant white cane, a tool used by the visually impaired.

Lined with sculpted trees, a shining sun and glinting crescent moon, and with a floor covered in bright flowers, the room situates this canine gaiety in a buoyant, pastoral setting. Here, Ms. Gossiaux’s past is transformed from calamity—an injury that would have been devastating for anyone, but seems particularly cruel for a budding artist, almost on the level of Greek tragedy—into a chance to reconsider one’s relationship to traditional hierarchies. Instead of viewing the world as a place that is cruel to disabled people and has a clear pecking order among its creatures, atop which human beings unimpeachably sit, she reminds us of the ways people of all abilities contribute to the rich tapestry of existence, and how animal and man work paw in hand to make the world a better place. It’s a serious message, rendered with joy and humor.



Installation view of 'sonia louise davis: to reverberate tenderly' PHOTO: QUEENS MUSEUM/HAI ZHANG

While sight is an unmistakable consideration in Ms. Gossiaux's work, hearing and touch are central to that of 36-year-old sonia louise davis. "to reverberate tenderly" collects several of her textile-based soft paintings along with custom-made instruments and the musical scoring she invented. The instruments, called "sounders" and made of steel and hardware, look like something out of Dr. Seuss if he had gotten a design degree. Highly polished yet whimsical, the tubes, platters and strings are composed of familiar elements yet are completely novel and, with her scoring displayed on one wall of the show—bold dots, slashes of neon, elegant curves of aqua—are an attempt to democratize music making. As explained in the wall text, "if you create a never-before-seen instrument, then no one is an expert."



sonia louise davis's 'emergence: springtime again' (2023) PHOTO: QUEENS MUSEUM

This is the rare show that would have benefited from a multimedia element, as I found myself wishing there had been a recording of the various contraptions. Another trip to the Queens Museum will be necessary to satisfy that curiosity: Ms. davis's musical collaborators will perform using the sounders on Feb. 3 and April 6.



sonia louise davis's 'emergence: natural affinities' (2023) PHOTO: QUEENS MUSEUM

Fanciful as these works are, it's her textile-based pieces that are most interesting. Created using an industrial rug tufter, these lush abstractions pull you in, and the desire to run your hand over their surfaces is almost insurmountable. With plush areas adjoining tightly trimmed sections, high-pile bits interlocking with shortly cropped swatches, they seem to undulate and ripple on the wall. Most captivating are "emergence: springtime again" and "emergence: natural affinities" (both 2023), created as the cherry blossoms turned into a verdant summer landscape in the park outside her studio. The former, with its loops of magenta, swaths of blush and bursts of ocher appearing to float across the frame, seems like it could be a slide under a microscope, cellular and alive. The latter, mixing cooler sea and forest greens with the warmer colors of fatigues, could easily be a land survey, an aerial photo, or a macro image of moss on a trunk.

Upstairs, a section for children has samples of both artists' work that you can actually handle. If you visit, be sure not to miss it. The direct connection with

these pieces that's generally verboten in galleries and museums makes the sensuous exhibitions below all the more tangible.

Emilie L. Gossiaux: Other-Worlding

sonia louise davis: to reverberate tenderly

Queens Museum, through April 7

—*Mr. Kelly is the Journal's associate Arts in Review editor. Follow him on X @bpkelly89.*