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Seeing the Past from the Future

Artists look to the past, think about historical points of reference and reframe them for the contemporary moment.

By Shannon Eblen

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PHILADELPHIA — At first glance, the placid seascape might blend in with the paintings around it, were it not for the tarlike substance clinging to the panel. The neon sculpture could be mistaken for a similar piece just down the road at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In fact, Minerva Cuevas's chapapote-dipped paintings — found works she sources at flea markets or on the internet and dips in tar — offer commentary on the vulnerability of the waterways to oil spills. Mungo Thomson's glowing spiral, which reads "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," is a response to Bruce Nauman's "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths."

And it's hard to look at General Idea's "Great AIDS (Ultramarine Blue)" stretching 10 feet across a gallery wall without seeing the resemblance to Robert Indiana's "Love" a block away (sans photo-snapping tourists).

There is no one chapter of art history referenced in "Ancient History of the Distant Future" — a variety of social and political topics are addressed in this new exhibit of contemporary works woven through the galleries of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA).

"I think the key for this exhibition is that we are interested in artists who are looking to the past, thinking about historical points of reference, about historical art and reframing them for the contemporary moment," said Joseph del Pesco, co-curator of the exhibition and the international director of Kadist, a contemporary art organization based in Paris and San Francisco.

Mr. del Pesco and Kadist partnered with the Pennsylvania academy's curator of contemporary art, Jodi Throckmorton. The exhibition grew out of their conversations about contemporary art and museums in America. PAFA is one of the oldest museums in the United States, established in 1805 by Charles Willson Peale — who is best known for his portraits of the Founding Fathers — as a center for art education and exhibition.

Even today, the museum's reputation is closely linked with that back story.

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“I’ve had members tell me, I know what’s in there, Brooke, I’ve seen it already,” said Brooke Davis Anderson, the museum’s director.

In reality, she said, the historic building is as much a temporary exhibition space as the refurbished auto showroom next door, across a pedestrian plaza marked by a towering sculpture of a paintbrush. The 1876 building, primarily the work of Frank Furness, has hosted works by Rina Banerjee, and the newer space has exhibited John Singer Sargent.

“I think for a while there was that idea that the permanent collection was hung in a chronological way,” Ms. Throckmorton said, “and that it’s pretty static, and really it pretty much stopped at 1950.”

But she is rapidly acquiring 21st-century artworks to add to the museum’s 16,000-piece collection. Less than 3 percent of the collection is on view at any given time, which means art is constantly cycling through the galleries, new work mixing with the old. The museum plans a complete reinstallation in the next few years.

The Pennsylvania academy has always been a home for contemporary work, even if that isn’t the public perception. Paintings used to be bought straight out of the annual exhibitions, acquired within a few years of being made.