

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

# ‘Unorthodox’ Faces Paradox at the Jewish Museum

By KEN JOHNSON NOV. 12, 2015

The world of contemporary art may be a fractious place, but there’s one thing that almost everyone involved agrees about: Orthodoxy is bad. Slavish obedience to any dogma — aesthetic, academic, political, religious and otherwise — is anathema to Modern and contemporary art. Independence, freedom, originality, authenticity, critical thinking, defiance of authority and so forth: These are the prevailing values of art today, and they are what most progressive art schools try to teach. Unorthodoxy is today’s orthodoxy. That’s a paradoxical problem for “Unorthodox,” the Jewish Museum’s new exhibition of putatively unorthodox works by 55 artists from around the world.

The titular theme aside, it’s an engaging, often entertaining and intermittently exhilarating show. With about 200 works crowded into tight spaces walled in by temporary partitions, it has the feel of an Outsider Art fair — in a good way. The paintings, drawings, collages, assemblages, ceramics, weavings and videos on view are variously funny, funky, quirky, eccentric, idiosyncratic and visionary. It’s a plus, too, that few if any of the artists are widely known beyond the places where they live. Probably the most famous participant is the writer William T. Vollmann, here represented by juicy, expressionist paintings of women said to portray his female alter ego.

Much of the work is remarkably friendly. One of the first pieces you see is “The Baby,” a short black-and-white video from 1969 by the German artist

Valeska Gert (1892-1978). A close-up of this beetle-browed artist, then in her 70s, imitating with uncanny verisimilitude a crying, chuckling and gurgling infant, it's hilarious.

“Jugheads,” ceramic vessels with goofy, popeyed faces sculpted in relief on their fronts by Clayton Bailey of Port Costa, Calif., are delightful, and so are his sculptures of robots assembled from all kinds of shiny metal junk. Lumpy, colorfully glazed ceramic sculptures of women by Alice Mackler (New York) stare back at viewers with curious, quizzical expressions, giving the impression that they're animated by live primordial souls. A darkly comical sequence of four cartoon images made in 1973 by Marie-Louise Ekman (Stockholm) involves a woman watching television, a man emerging from the television, and a defecating dog. Known in Sweden as a filmmaker as well as an artist, Ms. Ekman is one of many in the show whose work you'd like to see more of.

Diane Simpson (Wilmette, Ill.) is another. She creates exceptionally elegant geometric sculptures by cutting and bending various industrial materials into constructions that look like combinations of architectural models and women's outfits. Also working inventively in a Pop-Constructivist vein is Park McArthur (New York), whose small, glossy, round-cornered panels bearing rectilinear compositions resemble blank shipping labels and traffic signs.

Videos projected in small, dark rooms all are transporting and mercifully not too long. With its pieces of office equipment floating across the screen, “Why do you call me when you know I can't answer the phone” (2012), by Dineo Seshee Bopape (Cape Town) evokes the surrealism of everyday life. “The Lesser Key of Solomon” (2015) by Tommy Hartung (Queens) combines vividly dreamy visuals and a soundtrack of religious oratory to hallucinogenic effect.

If the exhibition were presented simply as a roundup of underrecognized talent, it would be counted a success. But the title “Unorthodox” announces bigger ambitions. Organized by the museum's deputy director, Jens Hoffmann, and the curators Daniel S. Palmer and Kelly Taxter, the show aims, in Mr. Hoffmann's words, quoted in a museum news release, “to break with a cultural and artistic uniformity that has developed over the last century among artists and museums, proposing a nonconformist engagement with art as a means to disrupt the status quo.” That's an aim that the exhibition doesn't achieve. Anyone familiar

with contemporary art will find little that departs from currently popular styles to any significant degree.

In the 1960s, reductive abstraction in painting and sculpture could have been viewed as representing a kind of orthodoxy. But since the advent of Postmodernist pluralism in the 1970s, no art trend has been so dominant that it could be categorically described as orthodox. Academia may harbor pockets of thinking deemed orthodox by some, but given the month-to-month churn of new art appearing in galleries around the world, and new theories published regularly by, for example, *Artforum* magazine, no orthodoxy can hold sway for long. Museums may be slow adapters, but they, too, are always changing to try to keep up with artistic, social and technological developments. If the art world is beholden to some kind of orthodoxy, it's that of a progressive, liberal, left-leaning value system. "Unorthodox" is well within that paradigm.

Given its presentation by the Jewish Museum, viewers naturally will wonder if the show has to do with Orthodox Judaism. Not directly. In his catalog essay, Mr. Hoffman explains that the title "does not refer to a critique of religious orthodoxy in particular, but rather to orthodoxies in the plural, meaning anything and everything that is generally accepted within a wide range of cultural, social and political contexts." This stretches the term to the brink of meaninglessness. It's a longstanding fantasy that avant-garde art opposes and subverts the homogenizing effects of consumerism, bureaucracy, industrialization and so forth. But considering how capitalism constantly refreshes itself with innovative products and systems, it makes little sense to see art and mainstream culture in terms of an orthodox-unorthodox duality.

In his essay, Mr. Hoffman asks: "Is there art being made today that does not fit into traditional categories or established styles? If yes, where is it happening, and what does it look like?" There's an answer to the question that he and his fellow curators have overlooked. What would appear truly unorthodox in a New York art museum would be a show of works expressing radically fundamentalist religious beliefs, whether by Christians, Muslims or Jews. Curators who really want to think out of the box might also look for artists espousing views of the American right wing's lunatic fringe. Would they discover good art? Maybe, maybe not. But it's possible that they'd find material considerably less orthodox by today's art world standards than what you see in "Unorthodox."

“Unorthodox” runs through March 27 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue;  
212-423-3271, [thejewishmuseum.org](http://thejewishmuseum.org).

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