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ART REVIEW

‘Greater New York,’ a Show of the Moment, Dwells in the Radical Past

In the wake of an election, pandemic, protest movement, extreme climate and rising debt ceilings, MoMA PS1 comes back with a cautious display of art.

By Martha Schwendener

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Paulina Peavy, “Untitled” (1938-47),
Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Three things stand out about the current edition of “Greater New York,” a survey at MoMA PS1 of artists living and working in New York, which happens every five years: pitch-perfect politics, intense nostalgia and an underwhelming display of new art.

Organized by a curatorial team led by Ruba Katrib, “Greater New York” — which opened Thursday — is both a show of our moment and one that attempts to escape it through the trap door of history. In the art world at the moment, it’s safer to celebrate the underknown, underrecognized and under-acknowledged artist who was radical half a century ago than to dive into the actual messy politics of the present.

The best work here, overwhelmingly, is the art made decades ago, not within the last few years. That is unfortunate, because it gives the impression that great art isn’t being made right now. Meanwhile, art in New York is vibrant, which you can see on any given day, particularly in galleries on the Lower East Side, Chinatown and TriBeCa, and in pockets of Queens.

However, this is still a deeply political show. Every large exhibition trains you how to observe it, and here you quickly learn to look at the wall labels, which focus in many cases on the ethnicity of artists. This is interesting information but the hazard is that art is turned into a rhetorical instrument rather than a bearer of illuminating or speculative ideas.

The show features the work of 47 artists and collectives and bridges documentary photography, surrealism, painting and video. Here are dominant threads and standout contributors.

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Hands down the best paintings in the show are the bright, colorful abstractions by Paulina Peavy (1901-1999), an artist who said she had an encounter with a U.F.O. while attending a séance in California in 1932 and later moved to New York, where she lived and worked until age 97. Peavy's paintings here, made between the 1930s and '60s, are part of a wave of resurrections of lesser-known women artists in the 20th century, including Agnes Pelton, Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz, whose abstract paintings were based in spiritual or healing practices rather than the formal arguments and battles of mainstream art movements.