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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**



On the center wall, Alex Da Corte “Street View (Hoagiefest),” 2019, and foreground, Thomas Birch, “Victory on Lake Erie,” ca. 1814.
Alex Da Corte, Karma, NY and Sadie Coles HQ, London; Photo: Barbara Katus/PAFA, Philadelphia

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).

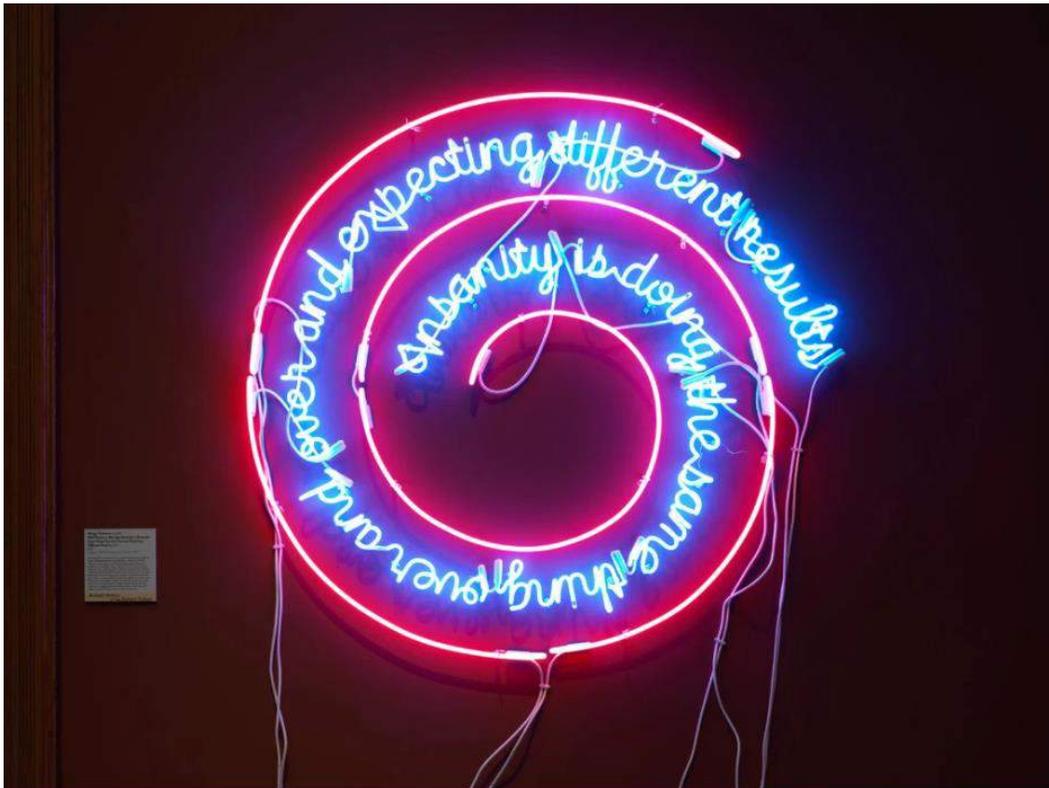
There is no one chapter of art history referenced in “[Ancient History of the Distant Future](#)” — a variety of social and political topics are addressed in this new exhibit of contemporary works woven through the galleries of the [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#) (PAFA).

"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.

"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.



Mungo Thomson's glowing spiral, which reads, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Kadist Collection, San Francisco; Photo: Barbara Katus/PAFA, Philadelphia

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.

"The truth is," Ms. Anderson said, "this historical collection was bought as contemporary art."

What is noteworthy is how the contemporary art is integrated with older works, not relegated to separate wings. While the Mungo Thomson and General Idea works have reference points outside the Pennsylvania academy, other works in "Ancient History of the Distant Future" respond to paintings that have long hung on its walls.

There are two commissioned works from Alex Da Corte. A phototex of "Scabby," the giant inflatable union rat, clings to the wall in a gallery with "Penn's Treaty with the Indians" by Benjamin West and portraits of people who made their money from the slave trade.

In the hall, an iPhone shot of Mr. Da Corte's hand holding a Wawa "Hoagiefest" [doughnut](#) encircles Thomas Birch's "Perry's Victory on Lake Erie," a painting of a War of 1812 battle over a trade route, creating a juxtaposition of 21st- and 19th-century views of capitalism.

"To propose there is something behind what you're looking at," Mr. Da Corte said, "it makes the painting, in some ways, a mask, or proposes the painting has some sort of artifice and isn't the whole truth."

In the Salon Gallery, where paintings are stacked to the ceiling in the salon style, Carla Zaccagnini's "Elements of Beauty" takes over half the room. Empty rectangles painted on the wall represent paintings slashed by suffragists in the United Kingdom a century ago and face one of the first female nude paintings exhibited in the United States.

Ms. Zaccagnini learned about the damaged paintings through her research into art-related crimes such as robbery and forgery. Each of the representations has a short audio guide to go along with it that tells about the paintings — depictions of mythical women controlled by men's desires, or well-behaved Victorian women — as well as descriptions of women's roles at the time and accounts of the destruction.

"What I see in these actions," Ms. Zaccagnini said, "is even if they attacked artworks, that's also a sort of belief in the importance art has in society. It's not against art. On the contrary, it's because they know art is important they go for it."

Most of the damaged paintings were restored, though given the cultural significance of that moment "now we might think it would have been interesting to have them as they were, without restoring," Ms. Zaccagnini said. It is generally considered that the ideal moment for a work is when it leaves the artist's studio, she pointed out, but "sometimes interesting things happen to an artwork afterward."

In conceiving and naming the exhibition, Mr. del Pesco said he was thinking about how contemporary art might be viewed in the future.

The future is referenced in Matthew Buckingham's "The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.," a digital print showing an eroded Mount Rushmore and a timeline of the mountain back to 66,000,000 B.C.E.

"I think it has a strong resonance in the halls of PAFA, which have paintings of George Washington and the Founding Fathers," Mr. del Pesco said.

The morning the exhibition opened, Ms. Throckmorton stood at the top of the stairs looking through the galleries, at Mr. Da Corte's [doughnut](#) and Mr. Thomson's neon — and yes, George Washington.

It was even more seamless than she had expected, she said, adding "It feels like things are at home."