

Stephanie Syjuco



21c's latest exhibit, 'Dress Up, Speak Up,' features more than 35 artists representing 22 nationalities

By Sara Havens
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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



"Cargo Cults" by Stephanie Syjuco | Photo by Sara Havens

The walls of 21c Museum Hotel are bedecked, bejeweled and bedazzled thanks to the themed artwork of the latest exhibition, "Dress Up, Speak Up: Costume and Confrontation." With more than 35 artists in various mediums representing 22 nationalities, the exhibit may look sparkly and fun, but underneath its surface, there are some deep issues at play.

“Whether clad in the stylized garb of Enlightenment-era Europe, the traditional coverings of ancient religious tradition, or the gender-bending bling of popular culture, these are representations of self and other role-play in real time, reaching back through history to address prevailing personal, social and political challenges,” explained 21c Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites in a news release. “For those who inherit a legacy of resisting cultural erasure, telling untold tales — lived, remembered or imagined — remains vital.”

In other words, a lot of the pieces in the show take contemporary figures — or ethnicities that were never represented — and place them in the context of the famous Euro-centric artwork most of us are familiar with from art history classes.

“Dress Up, Speak Up” features both new and established artists from all over the world, including two locals — Gaela Erwin and Vinhay Keo.

Highlights include a video by Jefferson Pinder in which he projects images from NASA to Civil Rights protests in the '60s onto his face and neck, and intriguing pieces by Kehinde Wiley, Ebony G. Patterson, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Titus Kaphar, Firelei Báez, Berni Searle, Vivek Vilasini, Fahamu Pecou and many others.

Insider met up with Stites recently to check out some of the artwork in “Dress Up, Speak Up.” She explained that most of the figures in the show are either bejeweled or bedazzled in fancy clothing, tattoos or makeup as a way of addressing personal, social and political struggles.

“They are costumed to confront,” she said. “To bring to light people, experiences and cultures that have been obscured or denied by the dominant historical narratives of Western historical narratives, and the representation of those histories in Euro-centric images.”

For example, she pointed to some sculptures in the main room by artist Yinka Shonibare MBE. One is “The Age of Enlightenment: Gabrielle Emile Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Marquise du Chatelet,” which is of a woman sitting at a desk. The subject is a mathematician and scientist who contributed to the study that would become calculus, but she is relatively unknown in history because she is a woman.

The sculpture has no head, a theme in Shonibare’s work.

“In all of his work, he obscures the face or doesn’t give one at all,” said Stites. “His work here examines the Age of Enlightenment, which brought great things for people, but it also brought the idea of dominance.”

In Ebony G. Patterson's tapestry-style piece, which takes over the back wall of the main room, she explores the construction of gender and urban masculinity in the context of Jamaican culture, which is where the artist is from.

Pink cinderblocks are situated around the room as a way to tie in the theme.

"Men are wearing pink, flowers and jewelry," Stites pointed out. "It's all about visibility — who gets to be visible and who doesn't. Telling unseen stories — whether lived, imagined or inherited — is at the heart of many of these artists' practices."

Some of the best-known work in the show is located downstairs in the 21c atrium. Stites said many people are coming to the show to see two pieces by artist Kehinde Wiley, who recently completed a portrait of President Obama.

In this show, he has "Morpheus" and "Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Million Peasants." The former is a larger-than-life piece that depicts a young African-American man dressed in streetwear posing similarly to the female "courtesan," often featured in prominent European art by the likes of Goya, Titian and Manet.

Stites said Wiley is interested in not only in filling in the gaps of art history, but also transforming art history.

"He weaves these figures back into an art history that did not represent them," she explained. "By titling the piece 'Morpheus,' he's laying claim to ancient Greek mythology, the god of dreams."

One more interesting piece in the show is a series of photos by artist Stephanie Syjuco, a Filipino native who now lives in Berkley, Calif. "Cargo Cults," which shows Syjuco covered in patterned fabrics from retail stores like Forever 21 and The Gap, also has been recently featured in the Sunday New York Times.

In the pictures, she poses with belts or ropes around her neck and cables around her arms to draw parallels to slavery. Stites said the clothes are supposed to resemble "ethnic fashion," but upon closer inspection, you can see the sales tags hanging off each item.

"The clothing is actually made all over the world and shipped on the same slave-trade routes of the past," said Stites. "And after she takes the photos, she returns the clothing."

"Dress Up, Speak Up" continues through Jan. 15. The exhibit is free and open to all. 21c is located at 710 W. Main St.