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CRITIC'S PICK

5 Artists to Watch at the California Biennial

“Pacific Gold,” the resuscitated survey’s 2022 edition, offers a revelatory look at fresh art in the region, but not without controversy.



The newly opened Orange County Museum of Art, designed by Morphosis Architects, is exhibiting “Pacific Gold” in four galleries.

By Jonathan Griffin

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COSTA MESA, Calif. — “Pacific Gold” is the swaggering title of the 2022 edition of the California Biennial, a regional survey that has been in existence, under various missions and monikers, since 1984.

The last California Biennial was held at the Orange County Museum of Art in 2017; its resuscitation also marked the reopening of the museum in a new building, on Oct. 8.

This otherwise strong biennial has been marred by revelations from the 84-year-old Pasadena-based artist Ben Sakoguchi that the museum removed his contribution to the exhibition a month before its opening, ostensibly because of its inclusion of a swastika. His multipanel painting, “Comparative Religions 101” (2014-19), features satirical appropriations of religious imagery, and is consistent with his lifelong artistic offensive against racism and nationalism.

(When approached for comment, the museum repeated a statement quoted in previous news reports: “Organizing the Biennial was an iterative process, with artworks being considered through-

out, up until the opening. Ultimately the artist was not included in the exhibition.”)

“Pacific Gold” was curated by Gilbert Vicario of the Pérez Art Museum, Miami; Essence Harden of the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; and Elizabeth Armstrong, who was chief curator of Orange County Museum from 2000 to 2008, and co-curator of biennials during that time.

Declining a single curatorial position, the three have taken the temperature of art produced in the Golden State over the past few turbulent years, then honed their findings into a concise, 19-artist roster.

The biennial’s thematic threads include diverse forms of labor, from intricate handicrafts to agricultural toil. (Pacific Gold, it turns out, is a brand of potatoes, its logo featured in a sculpture by Narsiso Martinez.) Hybrid humans also appear throughout — part animal, part plant, part object.

The names of some artists, like Rashaad Newsome, Clare Rojas and Candice Lin, will likely be familiar to many visitors. Others, however, will not. It is one of the biennial’s strengths to include accomplished work by makers who are not (yet) regulars on the gallery circuit. Here are five artists worth watching.

Maria Maea



Maria Maea’s “The Jade” (2021–22). Her figures, which she refers to as “future ancestors,” are made from braided palm leaves, corn stalks and other desiccated vegetable matter.

During the early months of the pandemic, Maria Maea, 34, began growing produce in her small yard in Los Angeles. As well as eating what grew, she made art out of it: Her rangy figures that she refers to as “future ancestors” are made from braided palm leaves, corn stalks and other desiccated vegetable matter.

Maea, who is half Mexican, half Samoan, sees these sculptures as a means to connect with her heritage as well as to talk about the parallel processes of entropy and proliferation embedded in the diasporic experience. Old knowledge is lost; new knowledge accrues. While teaching herself to weave baskets, she learned from family members about the role of weaving in Samoan culture. Her sculptures change over time, especially when transported between exhibitions: On view here, “The Jade” (2021-2022), which incorporates a concrete cast of her nephew’s face, is accompanied by a neat pile of soil and seeds that have fallen out of dried flowers.

Hector Dionicio Mendoza



Two works by Hector Dionicio Mendoza, from left, “Hercules/El Mundo” (2019), and “Coyota” (2020).

Hunter or hunted? A coyote’s huge form crouches against the museum wall, its expressionless face an empty-eyed mask. The piece, “Coyota” (2020), is by Hector Dionicio Mendoza, 53, who lives in Salinas on California’s Central Coast. He immigrated to the United States from Uruapan, Mexico, with his family when he was 12; two of his aunts worked as coyotas (the female form of coyote in Spanish), bringing people across the border illegally. His sculpture, in which a plywood human silhouette shelters beneath a cardboard carapace, commemorates those women.

The nearby “Hercules/El Mundo” (2019), its legs scaled with eucalyptus bark, hauls not one but two lumpy globes upon its back: one sprayed sci-fi silver, bedecked with various ports and hatches, and the other dusted with rich brown soil.

Alicia Piller



Alicia Piller's "A Mother's Voice. Rages. Global Warnings." (2022), a homage to the activist Helen Jones-Phillips, whose son, John Horton, died while being held at Los Angeles's central jail.

"A Mother's Voice. Rages. Global Warnings." (2022) by Alicia Piller, 40, is a soft sculpture evoking a rocky mountain. Vinyl is Piller's primary medium, a material she laminates, wraps and weaves around other found forms — here including picture frames and chunks of foam.

Printed on two sides of the vinyl peak are photographs of the activist Helen Jones-Phillips, one arm raised defiantly, at a protest against police violence in 2020. According to the exhibition label, Jones-Phillips's son, John Horton, was killed in 2010 by police officers while being held at Los Angeles's central jail. (The L.A.P.D. claims it was a suicide.) Here Piller describes Black resistance as a geologic fact, built from impoverished materials.

Svetlana Shigroff



Svetlana Shigroff's "Black Bikini & Tan Hiking Boots" (2021), serves as a memorial to a woman who went missing in the Mojave Desert and was never found.

Svetlana Shigroff, 40, divides her time between Los Angeles and Yucca Valley, near Joshua Tree. A news story about a woman who went missing in the Mojave Desert was the impetus behind Shigroff's awesome, psychedelic tapestry "Black Bikini & Tan Hiking Boots" (2021). Shigroff was incensed by the reports' salacious emphasis on the woman's attire rather than the suspicious circumstances of her disappearance. The woman was never found, but Shigroff's monumental piece — made from tufted fabric reclaimed from the apparel and costuming industries — serves as a baroque memorial, replete with shrieking skulls and a kneeling angel of death.

Laurie Steelink



Laurie Steelink's "Gathering Power (Indian Market Booth)," from 2022, inspired by the artist's participation in the Indian Market in Santa Fe, N.M.

Though she is a member of the Akimel O'otham Nation, Laurie Steelink, 61, was raised by a white family in Tucson, Ariz. Only later in life did she reconnect with her biological family and cultural inheritance. In 2019, she made paintings and sculptures to sell at the Indian Market in Santa Fe, N.M., an initiative that had her reassessing her identity as a Native American artist.

"Gathering Power (Indian Market Booth)" (2022) is inspired by Steelink's participation in that and subsequent markets, employing the wooden booth that she fabricated to display her wares. Steelink's artifacts are laced with intentional irony and questionable authenticity (despite being made by a genuine Native artist): a talking or walking stick, adorned with a bike light and periodically raised by a motorized crank, and an ornamental cast stag's head fringed with feathers cut from cardboard.

In their introduction to "Pacific Gold," the curators note that, "Prior to European contact, California was one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas in North America." Steelink anchors an exhibition that frequently relates to Indigenous knowledge and history in a refreshingly contemporary manner.

California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold

Through Feb. 26, 2023, Orange County Museum of Art, 3333 Avenue of the Arts, Costa Mesa, Calif., ocma.art.