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Lehman College Art Gallery

Presents



**For
Immediate
Release**

Alien Nations

**Anxious? Isolated? Alienated?
Artists Take Aim at Troubled Times**
February 7 to May 6, 2017

Reception: **Thursday, March 23, 5:00-8:00 PM**
Featuring a food performance by Alison Kuo

Alien Nations explores how artists convey a sense of people's alienation from modern society. During a time of great political upheaval around the globe, **Alien Nations** looks at how a myriad of social issues affect the psychological state of the individual. Isolation, dislocation, absence of communication, human rights, immigration, and technology that directly impacts basic human relationships all exponentially intensify the sense of alienation in an age of anxiety.

Curated by Bartholomew F. Bland and Yuneikys Villalonga

The exhibition presents a broad range of media by both emerging and established artists who express their visions through painting, photography, sculpture, installation, video, and performance documentation. **Alien Nations** brings together 18 artists whose works reflect on issues of the individual's identity within today's social disorder. Artists include: Lisa Alonzo, Hernan Bas, Suzette Bross, Patricia Cazorla, Jesse Chun, Richard Deon, Lalla Essaydi, Carla Gannis, Scherezade Garcia, Katy Grannan, Mona Hatoum, Meg Hitchcock, Alison Kuo, Cecilia Mandrile, Lothar Osterburg, Nancy Saleme, Nari Ward, and Tricia Wright.

The exhibition addresses the gnawing modern malaise of humankind – a sense that we are increasingly “plugged in” to a technology-drenched society, in which, despite nonstop instantaneous communication and thousands of online “friends,” the world becomes ever more alienating to our fragile individual identities and our uncertain places in the world.

Lehman College Art Gallery

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Gallery Hours:
Tuesday to Saturday
10 AM - 4 PM

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At a time when definitions of social groups are blurring geographical, cultural and political boundaries, finding new ways of relating to the world and giving physical presence to this anxious psychological state have become urgent matters for artists, especially since many contemporary artists are engaged in the relevant questions and issues of our time. Concerns about the effects of global capitalism, displacement, and cultural transformation become more urgent as the intimacies of global life bring us into closer contact with an ill-defined “other” that has fueled rising populist movements, xenophobia, and a sense of cocooned alienation.

Some of the artists use diverse materials to create powerful, meaningful work that may be satirical, metaphorical or personal. Within works that create and document acute states of psychological anxiety, despair, or engagement with social issues, the artists in the exhibition also combine social exploration with a high degree of craft and concern with aesthetic beauty.

All of the works in the exhibition speak of contemporary forms of alienation—be they personal or collective, self-inflicted or enforced by others, or drawn from real, historical models, or from fictional, imagined creations. The exhibition includes works by artists such as Nari Ward who reflects on social protest using colorful, hand-dyed shoelaces, *Angelic Troublemakers*, as a comment on the importance of the role of social protest in the nation’s conversation today. Artist Lalla Essaydi, who was raised between Morocco and Saudi Arabia and who currently lives in the United States, portrays the life of women in Islamic society today. In her series “Bullet Revisited,” scenes are created with both the figures and the background covered in shimmery bullet cases. This reference to violence and war in society today contrasts with the beauty of the images themselves. The figure in Essaydi’s photograph turns her face towards the wall, rejecting the gaze of the viewer, in much the same way that the male figure, isolated and alone in a corner, is presented in Hernan Bas’s video “All by Myself.” Photographer Katy Grannan depicts unnamed women, alone against blank white backgrounds in the blinding Southern California sun, presenting themselves as glamorous, but undercut with a strong sense of life’s despair.

Moving from the broad social spectrum to the anxious interior psychological state, and a literal erasure of facial features, Carla Gannis, in works like *Re(presented) Mar 25 [Block Head]*, depicts the human face literally pixilated out of existence. In other of her photographs on view, the figure literally dissolves, dissipated in a sea of a thousand selfies, which seem to render portraiture strangely meaningless. Artists such as Cecilia Mandrile, in *One Other (The Desert Inside)*, highlight this thematic thread of the faceless figure, and how it symbolizes the fragility and malleability of the self. Showing a faceless doll hunched over a plate, the figure seems to be fruitlessly staring at a plate emblazoned with a staring face that cannot be seen or be mirrored back. Likewise, Tricia Wright, in her *Late Mirror Stage* series, creates a series of monochromatic baroque mirror paintings, literally incapable of reflecting the viewer, and suggesting both the pointlessness of vanity and a profound abnegation of self. Suzette Bross's series *Walk* shows, segmented, disembodied feet – selfies in which individual identity is obliterated.

Several of the artists in the exhibition look at how language itself can create a sense of disjointed isolation and alienation. Meg Hitchcock's work creates Jewish prayer cloths cut from thousands of letters in the Bible and the Koran - religious-based text works that literally dissect the word of God, discouraging her audience from reading by ignoring punctuation and spacing in the sentences she forms. This sense of being lost in translation, of meaning rendered meaningless, is echoed in the work of Lothar Osterburg's *City of Towers* series, showing a rising landscape (clearly inspired by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Tower of Babel*) in which the prideful builders of a tower designed to reach the heavens are punished by suddenly speaking a myriad of languages which render them incomprehensible to one another.

A vague militaristic threat, rendered slightly ridiculous by the artists, runs through other works in the exhibition. In the Gallery's rotunda, four planes from Richard Deon's *The Quick Response Squadron*, circle overhead in a seemingly endless roundelay. Deon's work shows a life-sized male figure, drawn from a 1950s American history textbook, merged with the form of a World War II airplane. These proverbial "men in grey flannel suits" circle aimlessly and brainlessly: the cross hairs of bomb targets line the wall, but the point of the mission is undisclosed. This same sense of the ominous bomb blast is seen in Lisa Alonzo's large color-saturated images. Her work shows

nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant in Japan and the ongoing social dislocation, but the “bomb blast” rings are made out of sugar roses, a thick palette of paint that looks piped on like the frosting of a birthday cake. Mona Hatoum’s *Over My Dead Body* provides a more humorous take on this militaristic idea - Hatoum’s face is shown in profile, a tiny toy soldier sitting on her nose. The artist’s angry, alienating glare makes war seem small and powerless, even something to laugh at.

Immigration and its subsequent senses of dislocation and isolation provide other aspects of the exhibition. Patricia Cazorla and Nancy Saleme in *DeFence*, have created a painted slatted fence, showing migrant laborers toiling in fields amongst lush greenery. The artists suggest that the fruits produced by these laborers are not theirs to keep, but rather to be enjoyed at the bourgeois dining table that is part of the installation. Alison Kuo’s video *Take Outtake* looks at the immigrant experience from another food perspective – that of working with fast food. Scherezade Garcia’s *Theories of Freedom: Golden Landscape* creates another decorative, beautiful, but deeply poignant installation made from gilded innertubes. While each tube shimmers with gold and cheerfully painted waves, marked with hand-painted travel tags, the piece reflects the high toll paid in loss of life and hardship by desperate refugees willing to voyage on the most flimsy of rafts. Jesse Chun’s *Blueprints #1-25* show the ghostly outlines of immigration and passport applications from around the world. Stripped of their locators and specificity, they become a welter of evocative shapes, which are still instantly recognizable as symbols of grinding bureaucracy.

Alien Nations’ subject matter reflects the ancient, ironic Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.” The times are turbulent, dangerous, and certainly “interesting.” The Lehman College Art Gallery recognizes that art is often used as a voice to express important issues and that it has a transformative power to promote awareness, provoke dialogue, and inspire action. Expressing these issues through art can have the power to shift public sentiment and begin conversations around our most pressing social issues. We hope the artists of **Alien Nations** create this conversation with our visitors and begin to unpack today’s current moment of anxiety.

The exhibition is made possible by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Jarvis, Constance Doctorow Family Foundation and the New Yankee Stadium Community Benefits Fund.



**Council on
the Arts**



About the curators

Bartholomew F. Bland is the Executive Director of the Lehman College Art Gallery. Yuneikys Villalonga is Associate Director of Exhibitions and Education at the Bakehouse Art Complex.

About Lehman College Art Gallery

Lehman College Art Gallery was founded in 1984 to serve as an arts center for the people of the Bronx that would play a significant role in the cultural life of the borough. Today, the gallery is an innovative center of contemporary art where visitors from the Bronx and the greater New York area can experience thematic group exhibitions that bring together famous artists with emerging talents.