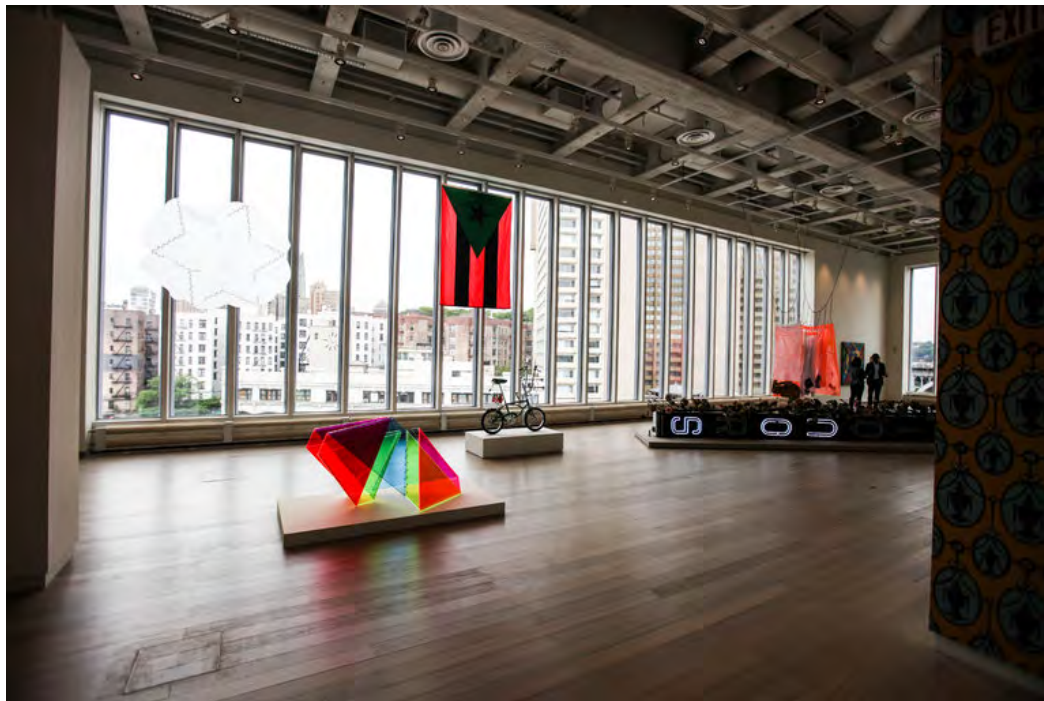


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Columbia's New Harlem Museum Opens, With Art From Its Neighbors

By JASON FARAGO
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An installation view of “Uptown,” at the Wallach Art Gallery. From left: “Cloud” (2009) and “Möbius” (2013) by Marta Chilindron; Miguel Luciano’s “Puerto Rican Flag in Red, Black and Green” (2017) and “Run-A-Bout” (2017); Leeza Meksins’s suspended “Purse Strings and Body Bags” (2017); and Nari Ward’s “Xquisite LiquorsouL” (2009). Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

New York, New York, is the city so nice it got two of everything: two baseball teams, two decrepit airports and now two riverside art galleries designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. His Whitney Museum of American Art has packed in visitors since the spring of 2015, spellbound as much by its balconies and switchback staircases as by its light-filled, column-free galleries. Now it has a fraternal twin a hundred blocks north: the Lenfest Center for the Arts, which serves as a new hub for Columbia University’s art, film, theater and writing programs. Both rise eight stories beside the Hudson River, though the Lenfest is a bit farther inland. To reach the Whitney, you walk past former meatpacking warehouses that now sell thousand-dollar cashmere sweaters; the Lenfest, for its part, is a stone’s throw from that Fairway with the walk-in freezer.

The Lenfest hosts a performance space, screening room and the relocated Wallach Art Gallery — which has presented exhibitions by the likes of Nancy Holt and Xu Bing, presentations of M.F.A. work, as well as shows organized by graduate students in art history. Formerly ensconced in the university’s art history department, it now has 4,000 square feet in the new Piano building, which can be divided as needed with temporary walls. If in places the building feels like a reduced Whitney, with what a real estate broker might call a “partial river view,” the Lenfest does continue a happy third act for Mr. Piano, whose midcareer cultural

buildings, notably at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Morgan Library & Museum, didn't always live up to his early achievements. (His other major New York building, I ought to mention, is the headquarters of The New York Times.) Next door is Mr. Piano's larger, quietly distinguished Jerome L. Greene Science Center, whose narrow windows and industrial detailing look almost like a test run for his giant, nearly complete Palais de Justice in Paris, Mr. Piano's adopted hometown.

The Wallach has a full slate of programming on tap this year; on deck are encouraging-sounding shows on Frank Lloyd Wright and on black models in French modernist painting. It opens, however, with "Uptown," a showcase of contemporary painting, sculpture, photography and video by artists living in the northern stretches of Manhattan. The show's curator is Deborah Cullen, the Wallach's director, and she offers a sunny view of the uptown art scene, perhaps more rooted in its communities than its Brooklyn counterpart. "Uptown" features 25 artists, among them well-known figures like Sanford Biggers, Nari Ward and Julie Mehretu, but also impressive artists of less renown. A solid majority has roots in Latin America, the Caribbean or the African diaspora.

Mr. Ward, born in Jamaica in 1963, has worked for decades in Harlem and is represented here by a hefty yet understated assemblage, "Xquisite LiquorsouL," from 2009. Its base is formed from an old-style neon sign for a liquor store, some of whose letters have been rotated; it lies horizontally on the ground, and its surface is bestrewn with fake flowers and the toes of high heels and ballet slippers. As often in Mr. Ward's large-scale sculpture, junk from the street is infused with Afro-Caribbean motifs and a surreal vision of the natural world, although the pink flowers and dainty shoes may also put you in mind of the French Rococo. A similar elevation of the everyday can be seen in the art of Michael Kelly Williams, who solders musical instruments and decorative ironworks into uncanny mash-ups.

Ms. Mehretu has teamed with her wife, the Australian artist Jessica Rankin, to produce a suite of works on paper that speak to one another in charismatic counterpoint. Ms. Rankin makes spare, poetic collages in which a few oblique phrases, like "barely volunteering" or "your little pool of words," give ballast to geological formations, the night sky or the Empire State Building shrouded in fog.

Ms. Mehretu, too, has long had an interest in abstracting geography, and her supremely confident paintings on paper bristle with suggestions of bodies in migration.

There are duff notes. Elizabeth Colomba, a Martinican painter of languorous black women in lush surroundings, had an intriguing show last year at the Long Gallery in Harlem, but the two examples here are airless and mannered, and too reliant on gold leaf. The young artist Shani Peters collages Black Lives Matter demonstrations into earlier protests but undercuts her political gaze by outfitting the gallery with incense and meditation cushions. (There's a place for personal care, but when the fate of health care for millions of Americans is on the line, such hippie healing rings rather hollow.)

But on the whole this show hits high, especially when it offers a view of the vibrancy of uptown. John Pinderhughes's stately black-and-white photographs of Harlem seniors, in their Sunday best or else at work in a mechanic's shop, are testaments to the intimacy fostered through long years in a community. And Alicia Grullón — from the Bronx, technically, though a fellow of the Wallach — embedded herself in the senior citizens' center of the Grant Houses, a public-housing project not far from this gallery, to listen to the life stories of its longtime residents. Her video "Storytelling" sees Ms. Grullón winningly narrate their histories and dreams, in both English and Spanish, against a digital backdrop of Hollywood clips, Billie Holiday concerts and documentary video of the old-age home.

"Uptown" is being pitched as the first in a triennial series, and if it's meant to proclaim the Wallach's arrival, it also functions, perforce, as a kind of peace offering. Columbia's expansion into west Harlem — the university prefers "Manhattanville" — marks the university's largest growth since moving to Morningside Heights in the late 19th century, and has occasioned angry op-eds, lawsuits and even hunger strikes. The focus on local artists is a welcome decision, therefore, and "Uptown" will also partner with other Harlem institutions, including the Studio Museum, El Museo del Barrio and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Did the art world need another -ennial? Perhaps not, but Ms. Cullen's first show and its partnership with Harlem institutions large and small are acts of good faith for a university whose designs north of 125th Street have not always been benign. And her cunning decision to cast "Uptown" as a triennial means that Columbia is on the hook to meet its artsy neighbors at least once every three years, and, I hope, far more often than that.

Uptown

Through Aug. 20 at the Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, Manhattan; 212-854-6800, columbia.edu/cu/wallach.

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