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Oct 11, 10 min read

An Interview With Volumes: Queens International 2018 Co-Curators Sophia Marisa Lucas and Baseera Khan

By THOMAS MOODY



Queens Tribune: This year's Queens International, Volumes, is in partnership with the Queens Library, the first of its kind for the Queens International. How did the partnership come about?

Sophia Marisa Lucas: Once I began to work on the exhibition, I started by reading all of the catalogs to get a better sense of the history and trajectory: Were there any patterns in how the exhibitions changed over time? What did any differences or evolutions say about changes within the Queens Museum, or changes within the landscape of Queens and its creative communities?

In Tom Finkelppearl's statement in the first International catalog, he introduces QI as an initiative that would support a Queens Museum mission to be an international art center, by "seeking the international in the local." He goes on to say that "since the entire world has come to Queens, we can organize an international art exhibition just by taking some rides on the local subways." I had noted in my review of the catalogs that the neighborhood representation of Queens International had been decreasing, with more and more artists being linked (somewhat expectedly) to Long Island City or Ridgewood. So I felt that partnering with an institution that had a massive spread over Queens was a gesture that was consistent with the mission—whether we were able to reach and feature artists from significantly more neighborhoods or not.

QT: Libraries and Museums are both great storekeepers of knowledge, but the ways in which each institution presents this knowledge is very different. In what ways did partnering with a library shape the curation of the exhibition?

SML: It was also an interesting opportunity to pose some questions about what it means for these types of institutions to nestle their work within one another—something that we will eventually do in a more substantial, long-term way when a branch of the Queens Library opens at Queens Museum. I mentioned the partnership in the open call as a definite but undefined part of the framework, and was pleased that some artists presented compelling ideas related to public space, the archive, and institutional canons.

When it came to the possibility for installations in the library branches themselves, I worked with the staff the library to determine possible

sites, and brought on Tania Marinos as an engagement coordinator to help do research into the characteristics of each site and its community as a starting point for thinking about what artists and artists could be paired with the sites in meaningful ways.

I was also doing research into the histories of public libraries and museums, as well as their contemporary practices and relationships to technology. How did they consider their role in communities? Who did they serve? The Queens Museum and Queens Library have very similar missions, but we have different strategies and are working in different institutional contexts, even though we have overlapping constituents. It's not only generative, but also very instructive to think about how and why we do things differently and what we can learn from one another.

Historically libraries and museums have had different relationships to the public and the very idea of public and private space. Baseera and I talked through ways in which we could communicate issues that relate to both institutions, like access to information, user agency, transparency of structures.

QT: Why is this concept an important one for 2018?

SML: There are many reasons why this is an incredibly important time to talk about how and by whom information is shaped, and who has access to it. From Net Neutrality to “fake news” and the NSA, there is a developing social consciousness around not only how information is transmuted and transmitted, but also about how it is appropriated from individuals, and capitalized upon.

An exhibition like the Queens International, where one can experience a great plurality of perspectives that aims to represent the diverse population of Queens, it becomes significant to bring together a group of artists to ponder and question these issues (which affect different people in different ways—according to the biases of social structures and systems). I also think that these are very complicated issues, and the range of work in the exhibition addresses them from many different angles. Some are more indirect, and others very explicit. Some are taking a more historical perspective, some are responding to the particular conditions of the digital era. Together the hope is that the show can really illuminate the ways our efforts to organize and order

have always come at the expense of other people, non-human organisms, or value systems. Some artists are proposing ways to break those patterns, others are embodying their outcomes so that they can be more viscerally understood outside of the ways they are recorded in official histories.

QT: I felt much of the exhibition dealt with the idea of knowledge: who controls it, how it is disseminated, and how those whose own knowledge has traditionally been marginalized can disrupt the status quo and present new narratives. As Queens is the most diverse borough in the most diverse city in the country, can you speak to the importance of exploring this theme at the Queens International.

BK: For Volumes, we are thinking about material and infrastructure as a way to discuss identity in America, as a way to complicate the spaces between information and knowledge keeping and making. At times artists are working directly with materials as performative replacements of their own body, thinking through American occupation or historical categorization that erased or mythologized cultures, materials, and religions. We are also looking at how artists use formal abstractions and collages of material in art to point to bodies, land, and history in an urbanized gridded system—if you don't fall in line with the grid you are rendered invisible. Identity in the art historical information and knowledge sector is seen as a politics. Artists in the show, at times are admittedly against the political nature of their bodies as information and knowledge, as representatives of a larger group. Instead they are very much dedicated to their research in science and international perspectives, they are fixated on materials and art historical trajectories.

To answer the question more directly, this exhibition is very important right now because, in my opinion identity politics as we know it has everything to do with the way this country came together. Identity politics is oddly seen as a black thing, or brown thing, a non-white thing, but it is an every-thing. This country pioneered capitalism by ownership and occupation of land, people, and history. Our country created a hierarchy of identity to enable the system of capitalism. Art is a vocal and visual receptor of the times—many people in this country are getting their rights striped away, gunned down, as I write this so clearly there is a real re-centering of questions around identity in the

art-world. There is a real refocusing on gender roles and race politics in the entire nation.



QT: This years QI features 43 Queens-based artists, working in a variety of mediums and in a diverse range of styles. Can you speak to the relative health of the visual and performative arts in Queens?

SML: I received 500 applications from artists in over 30 neighborhoods. The artists in the final show represent connections to 15 neighborhoods, and come from several generations, ranging in age from 24 to 77. They represent different levels of training, from self-taught to graduate level degrees. And finally this is an exhibition that

features a majority of female-identifying and nonbinary artists. The artists work across different styles and mediums in ways that reflect who they are and what they are trying to communicate through their work. The vibrant diversity in these artists reflects that Queens continues to be a space where artists feel they have room to make their work. But in talking to artist in Queens, as in other parts of the City, there is still a sense here, that sustaining a practice as an artist in New York is challenging. So while the energy of Queens and its relative affordability is still a boon, there is a deep need to find ways to support and maintain the artistic communities here if we value their presence.

BK: We added to the invitation component of our process by reaching out to tenured artists of the community, alumni, artists that were on my radar from residencies programs, or teaching—we did this to honor the open call and facilitate our ambitions to think through the museum and library relationships.

Having a show that represents such a large section of Queens does bring up questions like, what is the role of a museum? And, how does the museum complicate the work being done in the neighborhoods by the native populations of those communities. I think that is why Sophia and I wanted to start the show off in the atrium, the skylight area of the exhibition. There you will find the title wall that tells you to use the space and find the work how you choose, and not how the curators have structured the show. It is at least an attempt on our part to remain sensitive to the community, and not create a dominant representation of artists in Queens, but to add to the ever growing and maturing population of artists and makers.

QT: Another partnership was between you both as co-curators. Sophia, what was it like curating with an artist? Were you able to get deeper insights into the artist's relationship to a museum or gallery? And Baseera, how does curating make you reconsider your approach as an artist (if at all)?

SML: Once I got a sense of the submissions and how the relationship with the Library and its staff would function around, I thought about other perspectives that would be complementary. There is a bit of a tradition of practicing artists co-organizing the International. When you are working with such a large group at varying stages of their career, it becomes really generative to have different types of

facilitators and instigators in the conversation not only contributing their relationships to the community of artists, but also approaching concept, process, and materiality in dissimilar ways. I reached out to Baseera in to help shape the exhibition because I felt a kinship with her work and her politics, but also enough of a distinction in our points of view that allowed us to productively determine a shape a scope that represented our shared ideas, starting from what I had gleaned from the studio visits I'd been on. Who she is as an artist has colored this exhibition in profound ways. For instance, one of the key threads we established for the exhibition related the ways people actually move through spaces, physical or virtual, literally or metaphorically; objects in the exhibition benefitted from Baseera's work in performance, to hone this idea of embodied understanding, navigation, taking up space. I've learned so much from the kinds of approaches she took in communicating with artists and crafting ideas.

BK: I'd say there is a strong camaraderie amongst artists on my part, and I have witnessed Sophia advocate for artists and care for the work, so trust is a big component. Curating is not only a platform to give space that is needed, but it is also a time to build upon the primary understandings of each artist in the group. Sophia reaching out to me and expanding the curatorial process brought positive tension for the both of us this past 9 months, and I will continue to engage through the planned public programming during the exhibition ending in February.

For the past 5 years I had the privilege of working with graduate and undergraduate students from The New School, NYU, SVA, and Columbia University. My role as a professor conducting studio critiques is very similar to my curatorial process this past year-ish, it's a long term and persistent dialogue of true collaboration. A driving forces in signing on to the QI team was to always make space for others, and because I am an artist I see how hard it is to maintain a practice, and be seen by institutions, I feel the everyday hustle to pay your bills and still have a free mindfulness for artistic vision. Knowing those nuances puts me in an incredible position as co-curator for QI, it shares an in-the-field research and perspective—because I see you. Maybe in the back of Sophia's mind she saw this place making process in my art practice and put in a request to have me join the team, mixing in with her work with Milford Graves, the libraries, and the idea to invite artist Ryan Kuo to design the website. As we got to know each other and trust our

intentions this kinships created a system that allowed for “linked fate” over all.

How curating changes my perspective of artmaking? It has given me insight on what it is like to have a team of people working in your favor to create the most essential form of your work, to lol, speak in volumes. The relationship to production collaboration, and editorial collaboration—with the exhibition designer John Wanzel, or with Larissa Harris in editing and pushing us to think about the work online or printed form, invaluable. Also, the information that Lindsey Berfond provided and the thoughtfulness of their programming ideas to expand our concepts, is so humbling and awesome. I hope to be an artist who can work in this nested framework one day, it’s like, just around the corner, I can feel it, but there is always another corner. I have had the luxury to work in a paired down version of the Queens Museum. Lia Gangitano at Participant Inc, a non-profit gallery in the Lower East Side, founded and runs this space, I call her the rebel lady of our times (in the artworld)—she took a chance on me, she saw my work and decided to give me a show last February 2017. All the community building and exhibitions thus far, including my work with Sophia is really because I had a platform to speak at Participant Inc. Lia gave me space to do what I needed to do—and that is why being asked to come of board with Sophia, who is doing that same work here in Queens, at the museum, is so special and palpable, it is worth keeping this energy flowing to the next group of artists, who will then in turn keep it moving as well.