

Where best to experience art? At home or in the museum?



Iranian artist Tala Madani's painting "Sainted, 2015" is part of the ART21 exhibit "On Space and Place Contemporary Art from Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Vancouver" at the DePaul Art Museum. (Jamie Moncrief)



By **Lori Waxman**
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Where best to experience art? At home, from the comfort of your couch, or in the museum, walking around quiet, white-walled galleries?

The answer may seem obvious, but "On Space and Place," up now at the DePaul Museum of Art, proves it is not. The museum collaborated with ART21, maker of the excellent PBS documentary series "Art in the Twenty-First Century," to display a selection of videos, sculptures, comics, photographs and paintings by the artists profiled during the program's current season, its eighth.

This fall ART21 features 16 artists, chosen for the cities in which they live and work — Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Vancouver, British Columbia — cities notable for not being art world centers. Despite or perhaps because they are not New York or London, these cities harbor some of the world's finest makers, among them Nick Cave, Stan Douglas, Minerva Cuevas and Tala Madani. (They also, of course, house many other terrific artists. Anytime a small group of people is chosen to represent a scene, there are 10 times more left out. I've got my list. Others are sure to have theirs.)

Though the artists are grouped by geography for the four-part TV show, which premiered locally Sept. 16 on WTTW-Ch. 11 and can be watched for free online, in the galleries they're presented thematically. The effect feels overbearing and, given the exhibition title, like an afterthought on the part of the museum to add its own concepts to something that had already been thought out well enough.

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In the lobby, smartly set by the museum's floor-to-ceiling front windows, Diana Thater's "Foam" plays on a stack of monitors. In typical Thater fashion, the colors of the top monitor, where floats a cloudy blue sky, are out of register, resulting in pretty moving rainbows. In the first gallery lurks a sculpture by Brian Jungen that could have been flying in Thater's ether: the fierce head of a bird of prey constructed from disassembled Nike Air Jordans, styled along the bold lines that Jungen's Dane-zaa ancestors might have used on tribal masks.

In the back gallery, quietly hidden from view, Liz Magor presents sculptures that are not quite what they seem. A disembodied leather glove holds a dead bird on a shelf; another bird is encased in a translucent box, afloat on a plinth; a dead mouse lies in an ashtray, balanced on a blue boulder with a wedge of spearmint gum. A few of these materials are what they are — taxidermied bird, gum packet, cigarette — but most are handmade by the artist from meticulous casts. Upstairs, a gleaming photograph by Barbara Kasten reveals a disorienting space of shifting geometries, of cobalt and emerald planes, of right angles drawn in thin air. Kasten used little more than a film camera, Plexiglas panels and a light source to make this picture.

I mention these artworks not because they are the best works of art in "On Space and Place" but because they are some of the ones that succeed on their own terms in the gallery. I obsessed over Kasten's and Magor's heady amalgams of fact and fiction no more after watching their ART21 segments, because although it's intriguing to be let in on an artist's studio process, especially when it is as painstaking as are theirs, it doesn't ultimately matter in the final appreciation. The work is the work, and it fits neatly in the museum. Television doesn't add much to the experience.

The same cannot be said for "Baby Marx," a video series by Pedro Reyes that explains Marxist principles through the use of wood-and-felt puppets. The shows are hilarious and right on, and they make perfect

sense as the product of an artist-parent whose projects often invite tongue-in-cheek participation in making the world a less violent, less unsustainable, less divisive place. But that's the TV series talking, where Reyes is shown biking his cricket-burger cart around Mexico City; running workshops to turn guns into musical instruments; and conducting what he calls the "People's United Nations" — run by regular folk, not diplomats. Little of that can be seen in the gallery, but a documentary crew communicates it wonderfully.

Likewise Nick Cave's "Soundsuit," a monstrous and magical full-body armor fashioned from thousands of buttons, with a bristly metal grille for a face and a tall spike on top. Cave's wearable sculptures are a treat to see in the gallery, where their abundant materials and laborious artistry can be inspected up-close; adjacent runs a video where soundsuits can be seen in action on a set stage, noisily enduring animalesque social rituals. On ART21, the artist goes shopping for inspiration at a flea market, revealing the modest origins of his marvelous creations. Soundsuits of raffia and twigs and ceramic birds dizzyingly erupt in a park, on the city street, in an abandoned theater, outside a boarded-up house. Cave explains their origin story, as a shield for the self-concocted in the wake of the [Rodney King](#) beatings, and no wall text could ever say it better.

Then there's the storytelling genius of Chris Ware, whose diagrammatic comic books so subtly communicate the complicated murk of being alive. The gallery is no place to sit down and get lost in a graphic novel, though it's perfectly fine for examining original blue-pencil and ink drawings (even when they're tucked away in a claustrophobic hallway-cum-gallery). Television, though, turns out to be surprisingly sympathetic to Ware's humble sense of himself and his life, his astute analysis of how pictures are read, and the vintage bric-a-brac that fills his family home and attic studio.

Television often seems like the opposite of museums in terms of accessibility, popularity, commercialism and refinement, but so much of what makes art extraordinary today can't be adequately represented in galleries.

Sometimes, just sometimes, it's worth staying home and watching the tube.

"On Space and Place: Contemporary Art from Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Vancouver" runs through Dec. 18 at the DePaul Art Museum, 935 W. Fullerton Ave., 773-325-7506, museums.depaul.edu.

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