

Art in America

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Destination Art: Governors Island

by Wendy Vogel



Ajay Kurian: *The Very Best in Forms of Conquer*, 2015, mixed mediums, 40 by 40 by 18 inches. Courtesy the Trust for Governors Island. Photo Jason Mandella.

Fancy an art excursion outside the sweaty confines of New York's concrete grid, without the hassle of a car or train trip? Climb aboard a ferry to Governors Island. A former military base situated between Manhattan's southern tip, Staten Island and the Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook, the 172-acre island has been open to the public for a decade. During the summer months, boats run from the Battery Maritime Building in the Financial District seven days a week, with weekend service from Brooklyn's Pier 6 and via the East River Ferry.

This summer, "Visitors," a group exhibition through Sept. 27 featuring outdoor and indoor works by nine contemporary artists, is scattered throughout the island. Tom Eccles, executive director of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., and Ruba Katrib, curator of SculptureCenter in Long Island City, organized the show under the auspices of Art CommissionsGI, the public art wing of the Trust for Governors Island. "Visitors" joins various long-term artworks on the island that Eccles commissioned last year—four sculptures by Mark Handforth and a sound installation by Susan Philipsz referencing the island's military history. Alongside these projects, in the Governors Island Arts Center, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council has organized "(Counter)Public: Art, Interventions and Performance in Lower Manhattan from 1978-1993," an exhibition of photographs and ephemera about activist art, also on view through Sept. 27.

In keeping with the innovative visions of both Eccles and Katrib, "Visitors" is a cerebral show that challenges expectations of public art. Engaging themes of science fiction, speculative history and alienation, the exhibition has a light footprint. Given the artworks' visual subtlety, the exhibition catalogue containing unique written and visual contributions by each artist—available online or for \$1 on the island—becomes an essential document to navigate the show.

Five artists present artworks in traditional materials like sculpture and photography, but the legibility of these works is often hazy. Ajay Kurian's pool sculptures, containing a mixture of symbols and materials like chains, a stuffed policeman doll and artificial plants, are the most easily identifiable as site-specific art. Disembarking from the ferry at Soissons Landing, visitors encounter what seems to be a promotional poster for Governors Island. Part of a series by Darren Bader, the poster shows two female models in high-fashion clothing burying something mysterious in the island's dirt. Additional images from the series, depicting other slightly absurd actions, are wheatpasted around Manhattan. (Bader, known for his cat adoption center-as-sculpture at MoMA PS1, also created a performance work for the opening reception where three jazz bands played simultaneously.) Nina Beier, a Berlin-based Danish artist interested in stock image circulation, pasted an eerie blown-up photograph of an insect in an empty swimming pool on the opposite side of the island. Fischli & Weiss's *Kling Klong* (2010/2012), a moon rock playing chiming tones, is accessible only by timed tours in Castle Williams, and appears to blend into the fort's surroundings. Rachel Rose made a series of maps, displayed on signposts and in a catalogue insert, navigating paths for eight character types—such as protagonist, sidekick and guardian—to traverse the island.

Some artists present projects that register even less of a trace on the landscape. Kurian also created plastic cups bearing the logo of the sinister-sounding Voluntary Human Extinction Movement for the island's refreshment stands. Relational aesthetics artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster put together a science fiction lending library stocked with titles by the likes of Philip K. Dick, Marguerite Duras and HG Wells.

Rose's maps also fit into a third type of work in the exhibition—projects that require the artists' continued engagement with the island. The artist, whose work will be on view at New York's Whitney Museum this fall, plans to film a new work on the island based on the maps she created. Aki Sasamoto contributed a poetic photo essay to the catalogue about holes as places of concealment and comfort, and will perform on the island at a later date. Pilvi Takala, a Finnish artist, presents an interactive project called *Invisible Friend*, in which participants conduct a virtual relationship about their experiences on the island via text message. The number to call is available in the catalogue, along with a reproduced conversation Takala conducted through the Invisible Girlfriend SMS service. The conversation details fictional dates on the island, and served as research for *Invisible Friend*. The work reveals a key premise of "Visitors": history and experience are what you make of them.