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7 Standout Works at the 2022 Berlin Biennale, From 'Vomit Girl' Sculptures to Videos Reflecting on the Vietnamese Diaspora



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Mai Nguyễn-Long: *Vomit Girl (Berlin Cluster)*, 2022. PHOTO SILKE BRIEL

When French Algerian artist Kader Attia was invited to curate the 12th Berlin Biennale, which opened this past weekend across six venues in the German capital, he kept asking himself, why put on yet another another exhibition?

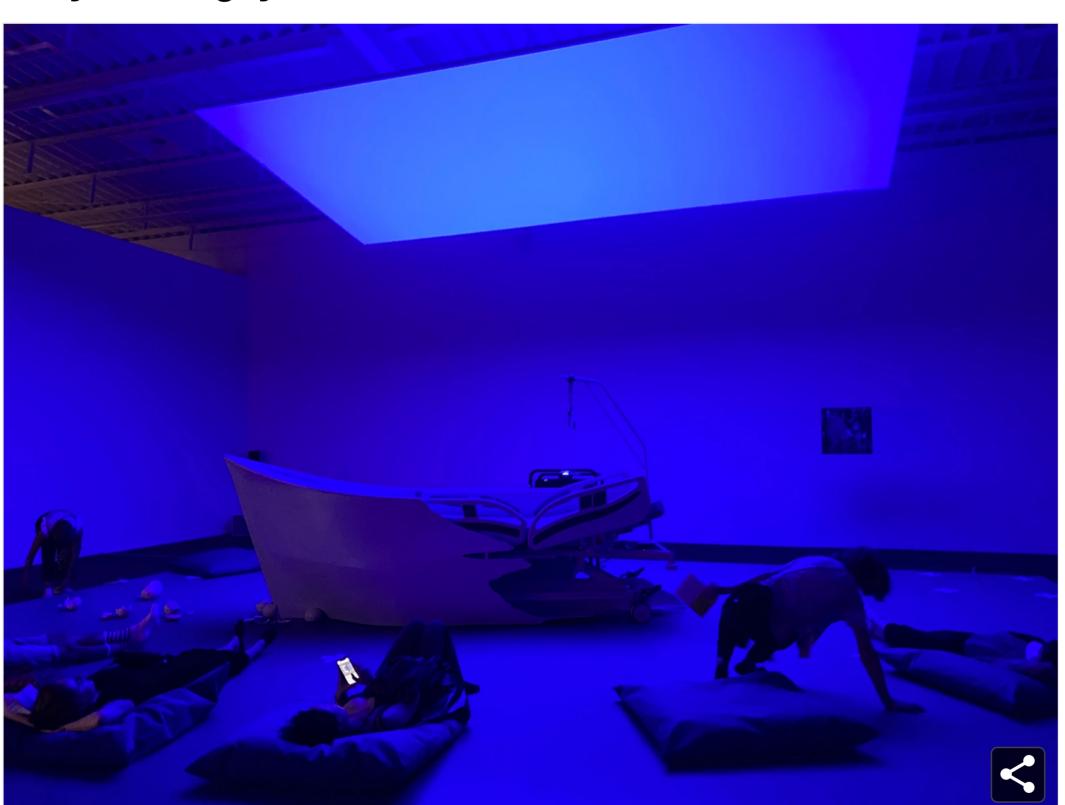
Recalling his careful existential deliberation in a talk to press last Thursday, he said he didn't want to pretend that art could change the world per se, but still felt that artists could help alter certain perceptions, slightly and slowly.

With "Still Present!" as its title, Attia's sprawling exhibition is devoted to works that help us see histories and perspectives that have been rendered invisible by colonialism and its afterlives. He pointed out that we are inundated by images and information, but that artworks can function as a magnifying lens that helps us slow down and reflect, because they command a different kind of attention than social media's constant stream. The artist also said, poignantly, that if humanity has only ever created machines for speeding things up, perhaps we could think of artworks as a tool for slowing down.

The resulting show, which runs through September 18, brings together works by 70 artists and collectives from around the world, and is laden with research-based works—archival materials in vitrines, timelines and infographics, and many videos. Some works emphasize anticolonial perspectives on ecology and feminism, while others respond to issues concerning the restitution of looted artworks.

Below, take a look at 7 of the standout works—nearly half of which are by artists of Vietnamese descent, a testament to the discerning eye of Đỗ Tường Linh, a Hanoi-based curator who is part of this edition's artistic team.

Thuy-Han Nguyen Chi



Thuy-Han Nguyen Chi, This undreamt of sail is watered by the white wind of the abyss, 2022, installation view.

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Photo : Photo Emily Watlington

Thuy-Han Nguyen Chi's haunting and mesmerizing installation *This undreamt of sail is watered by the white wind of the abyss* (2022), on view at Hamburger Banhof, stole the show. A cross between a hospital bed and a boat, the work's sculptural component sits on top of a plinth that's been painted production-screen blue, where visitors lounge, shoe-less, on bean bags to watch a captivating projection on the ceiling. The video was co-directed with Thuyen Hoa, the artist's mother, and tells the story of her journey by boat from Vietnam to Thailand then onto Germany after the Vietnam War. It dwells on—and in a sense, recreates—the moment when the protagonist, post-shipwreck, accepts her death and becomes surrounded in nothing but a blue expanse. It's implied that the narrator—the artist's mother—survives, since she is speaking in the first-person and past tense. But we're never told how—this is a work about a strange blend of peace in the face of tragedy, and about convening with ancestors; not one about triumph, resolution, or overcoming.

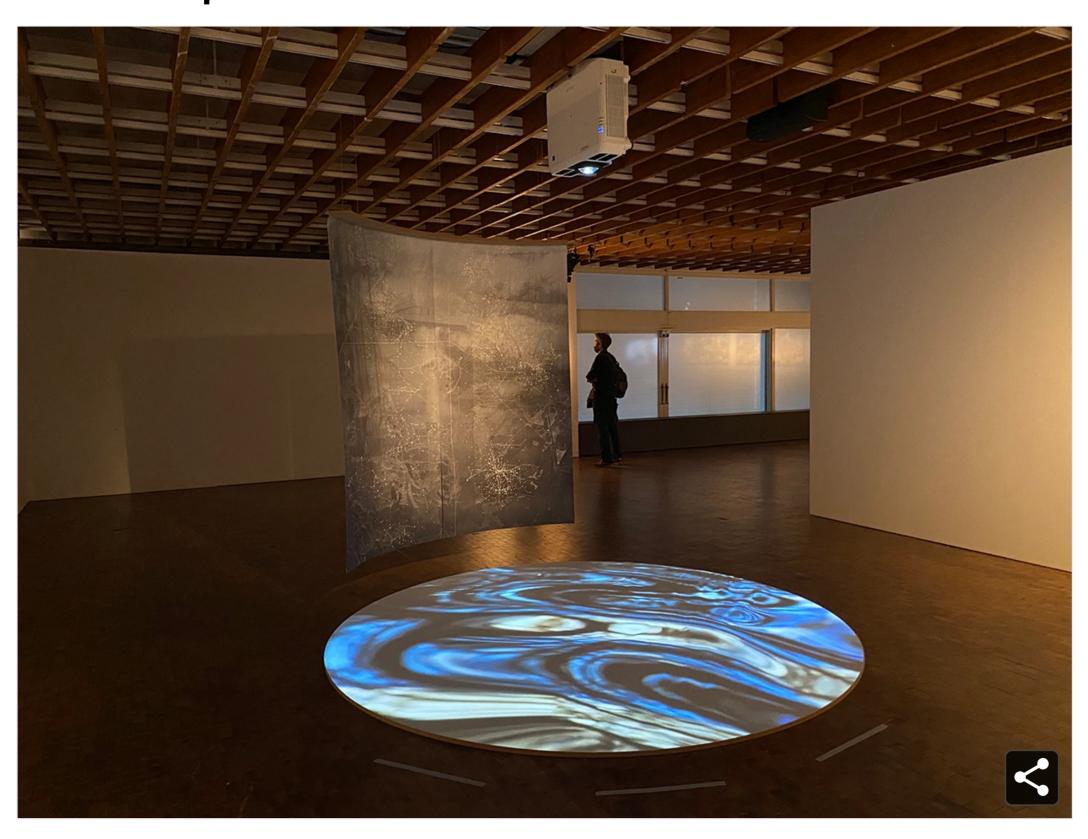
Prabhakar Kamble



Prabhakar Kamble, "Utarand" (Stacked vessels), 2022, installation view. Photo : Photo dotgain.info

This year's edition features a number of Dalit artists whose works challenge India's caste system. Prabhakar Kamble's "Broken Foot" sculptures, which borrow motifs and materials from daily Dalit life, are a standout. On view at the Akademie der Künste's Pariser Platz location, his vertical sculptures have bases made of metal casts of workers' feet, above which are tiered terracotta pots representing the caste system's hierarchy. Each sculpture is then topped with a symbol of dehumanization. One of the four features a cow—chafing at the notion that Hindu society often reveres cows over Dalits—while another is crowned with a ceiling fan, recalling the one from which Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula hung himself in 2016 in a tragedy that sparked protest and outrage. All are painted a shade of bright blue associated with caste abolition.

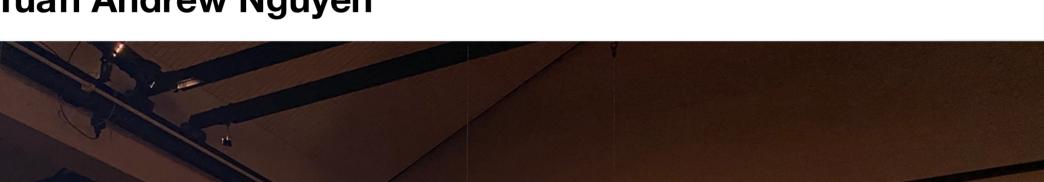
Imani Jacqueline Brown



Imani Jacqueline Brown, What Remains at the Ends of the Earth?, 2022, installation view. Photo : Photo Emily Watlington

This video installation features footage that the the London and New Orleans–based artist shot in Louisiana's coastal wetlands as she traversed them by canoe, foot, car, and three-passenger plane. That landscape is being gutted by fossil fuel corporations, whose invasive infrastructure is rapidly damaging the ecosystem in what is now referred to as a "petrochemical corridor." Municipal permitting maps used for oil and gas wells—as well as maps showing canals, pipelines, and flowlines—are laid over the intimate images she recorded. The juxtaposed imagery highlights how corporate greed parachutes in and bulldozes over connection, life, and rootedness. Brown is a member of Forensic Architecture, a collective who has a work on view at nearly every location of the Biennale—their video *Cloud Studies* (2022), to which Brown contributed, is on view at the Akademie der Kunste's Hanseatenweg location near her installation. But the intimate-feeling footage Brown shot on the ground is a welcome contrast to the didactic and distanced feel that Forensic Architecture's desktop cinema often has.

Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn





Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires, 2017. Photo : Photo Emily Watlington

Both biennale videos by Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn are standouts—one is on view at the Akademie der Künste's Hanseatenweg location, the other at Hamburger Banhof. They punctuate a show awash in works of desktop cinema and essay films with something more narrative and cinematic. There are hours and hours of videos in this biennale, and it takes commitment to watch them all, so it was no small feat when this 19-minute work drew a large crowd on the professional preview days. The two-channel video My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires helps anchor the exhibition's interest in decolonial ecology, which was the focus of the ADK Hanseatenweg section. The voiceover is a dialogue between a rhinoceros – specifically, the last Javan rhinoceros to be poached before the species went extinct in 2010—and the 15th-century sacred turtle who is said to have ended Chinese rule in Vietnam. The duo engages in a complex conversation about crosscultural and decolonial approaches to interspecies relationships. The rhinoceros wagers that Vietnamese humans are allies because they too have been treated like animals by the Chinese (Javan were poached because their tusks are believed, in Chinese medicine, to cure cancer). But the work also chafes against the easy pitfall of romanticizing Eastern human-animal relations, showing scenes of cockfighting and slaughterhouses, too. While many works in the Biennale rely heavily on didactic voiceovers, this meandering dialogue allows for more nuance and interpretation.

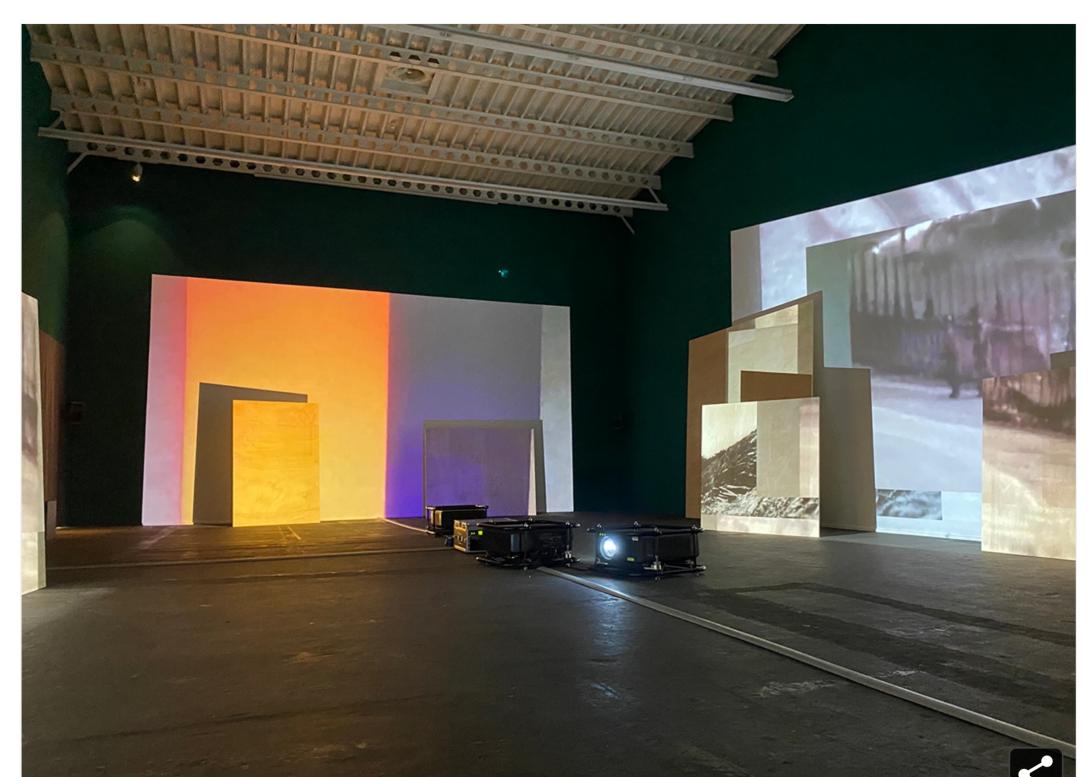
Noel W Anderson



Installation view of the 2022 Berlin Biennale at Hamburger Bahnhof, showing works by Noel W Anderson (left) and Calida Garcia Rawles. Photo : Photo Laura Fiorio

While Attia sees the exhibition as endeavoring to visualize histories rendered invisible by colonialism, a number of the most thoughtful works on view express an ambivalence when it comes to visibility and representation. Noel W Anderson's tapestries, for example, grapple with the twinned impulse to both push against the media's spectacularization of images of Black death and also make sure they are never forgotten. The Kentucky-born artist does this by borrowing images of anti-Black violence from history—some easily identifiable scenes, some lesser known—then warping the images digitally before turning them into Jacquard weaves. Made in cotton, they refer to slave labor and thus, a continuity of Black making. On view at Hamburger Banhof, one tapestry, titled *Hood Dreams I*, is attached to the ceiling at five different points and heights, its display further refuting the image's legibility while also lending it a commanding presence.

Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2019/22. Photo : Photo Emily Watlington

This sprawling three-channel video, titled *Oh Shining Star Testify*, is fractured by scattered wooden boards that gently break up the projection, à la Joan Jonas. The Palestinian artist duo, who currently have a show on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, often turn to fragmentation as a tool for grappling with the disjointed nature of Palestinian history. Some scenes were shot by the artists and are joined with footage recorded by Israeli military surveillance cameras. The work refers to the story of Yusef Al-Shawamreh, who was shot dead at 14 years old by Israeli forces after crossing the separation wall to forage akkoub. It is illegal to forage this edible green, and that law is considered targeted toward Palestinians, since the plant plays a significant role in Palestinian cuisine. This story is referred to with a poetic obliqueness, rather than exposed with a shocking or surveillance-like voyeurism—one line asks provocatively, "If only the mountain between us could be ground to dust."

Mai Nguyễn-Long



Mai Nguyễn-Long, *Vomit Girl (Berlin Cluster*), 2022. Photo : Photo Silke Briel

On the top floor at KW, a cluster of ceramic sculptures depicts different versions of Vomit Girl—a character developed by the Australia-based artist Mai Nguyễn-Long. Each of the feminine figures, with shapes and motifs inspired by traditional Vietnamese architecture, are regurgitating, and little coils and balls suggesting vomit are placed playfully about the plinth. For the artist, the character is a way to grapple with the trauma of the Vietnam War. She says that her vomit motif came from "a sense of being erased: having no identity, language, or voice to speak with." The series stands out from other works in the show by focusing on the emotional aspects of war and imperalism in a playful yet still incisive manner—elsewhere, didacticism and fact-oriented approaches dominate.

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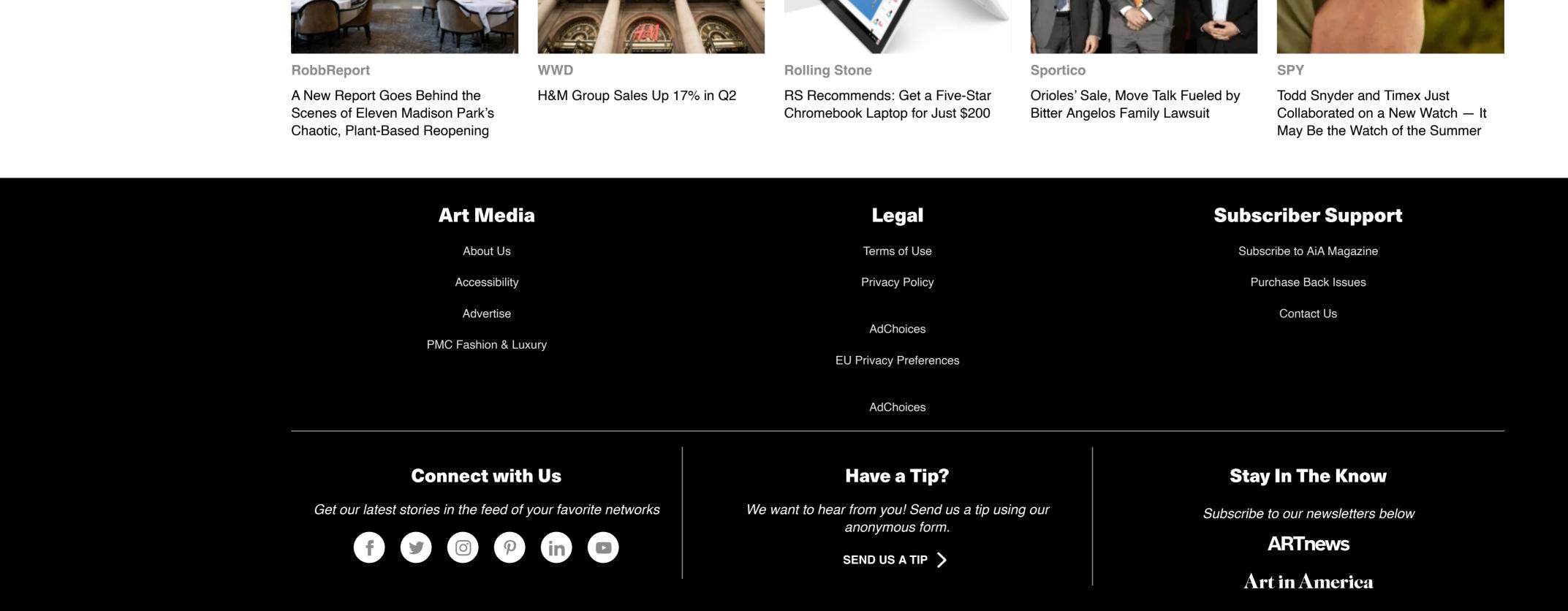
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