

**National Museum of Women in the Arts**

**NO MAN'S LAND:**

**Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection**

**Guide by Cell Audio Guide Transcripts**



**202-747-3417**

Welcome to the National Museum of Women in the Arts' cell phone audio guide for NO MAN'S LAND: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection, on view through January 8, 2017.

NMWA is grateful to the Rubells and selected NO MAN'S LAND artists for contributing to this audio guide. To hear the artists' reflections and collectors' commentaries, look for the blue cell phone icon on the labels in the exhibition and press the item number followed by the pound (#) key.

Interrupt any audio recording simply by pressing another item number and the pound (#) key. Press the star (\*) key for instructions.

**Virginia Treanor, associate curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, welcome (1:11)**

180#

Hello and welcome to the National Museum of Women in the Arts. We are thrilled to present NO MAN'S LAND: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection, an exhibition that brings together 37 of some of the brightest contemporary artists working today. Focused on the themes of the female body and the process of making, the works included here are alternately witty, insightful, irreverent, poetic, and provocative.

Our museum's curators worked with the staff of the Rubell Family Collection to create a presentation that focuses on

the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture as a way to highlight how women artists have pushed and redefined the boundaries of such categories.

Commonly associated with the physical location, not controlled by governing body, a “No Man’s Land” is a territory that belongs to no one and where rules do not apply. In this exhibition, “No Man’s Land” becomes a space in which these artists are free to invent, make, and disrupt expectations about women and art. Their “No Man’s Land” is an open, adaptable, and liberated space.

### **Don & Mera Rubell discuss Isa Genzken’s art (1:08)**

181#

(Don) Although many people associate us with collecting uniquely young artists, Isa Genzken represents an example of other artists we have looked at whose work we may have seen earlier but we responded to her later work.

This work was emotionally much more powerful for us. This is the work of a 65-year-old who is dealing with identity issues both of herself and which are common to all women or many women at that age. She is dealing with her physical identity. The lines that you see on the body are typical lines that a plastic surgeon will make before he performs surgery, particularly breast augmentation or uplift and a tummy tuck. There is some evidence of Botox injections. And yet it's all done in a sense in a very light fashion; I mean, you have the objects on her shoulders, you have the hairdo, the sunglasses and it's, you know, how does one stay young, feel young. But maybe it's a critical statement about the attempt of women to alter their physical appearance.

(Mera) Or maybe it's the pressure that society puts on women to address the physical all the time.

## **Don Rubell discusses Elizabeth Peyton's art (:53)**

182#

We were just meandering around the galleries of New York as we are prone to do and we wandered into Gavin's gallery and saw these three portraits which on first look appeared to be quite mundane. They were typical portraits, almost fashion portraits, but as we looked at them, we realized that there was a certain depth that this artist related particularly to these characters, it was the Sex Pistols and particularly Sid Vicious. And this was an artist in a way almost like a teenager looking at art, she is obsessed with the social portraits of our time, be it the Sex Pistols, be it her friends, be it pop figures, and she became almost a prototype for a whole group of artists that were very involved in social awareness and the social values at that time.

## **Mera Rubell discusses Kaari Upson's art (1:20)**

183#

In 2008, Don and I came to the Hammer Museum to see the solo exhibition by Kaari Upson. It was about an artist's obsession with a person who was pathetically and psychotically involved with an obsession about someone else. And it was an unfolding story which the artist really captured in the work. And so we went to visit the artist's studio and it turned out that the way she made these paintings was about Larry, who she had an obsession about, and she painted herself and then what she did is merge the two paintings face to face with each other as though they were actually kissing. And you would think that you would destroy the painting, but interestingly enough, she invented a way for these two figures to merge into something different. And I think it actually was in an inspiration for the name of this exhibition, "NO MAN'S LAND," because what she found in this merger was a new territory of identity, of maybe compromise, maybe

psychological interactiveness. We subsequently have collected maybe ten works of hers and we also did an exhibition and she was on the cover of our catalogue, “How Soon Now.”

**Amy Bessone, No. 329 (Edit), 2007 (1:54)**

184#

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time trolling for inspiration in second-hand book stores. Discarded auction catalogues I found there became my primary muses for a while. I made a number of paintings based on porcelain figurines I saw in these catalogues. No. 329 (Edit) is one of these. At first glance, these figurines seem like such mundane kitschy objects found on grandma’s mantle, but the longer I looked, the more perverse and sinister they seemed. There is a lot of fetish and colonial attitude in them and of course the aim of an auction catalogue is to incite the desire to possess. I blew these images up as if

to put them under a magnifying glass or microscope for closer inspection. The cinematic device of the close-up was also on my mind. I chose to tightly crop this image making her much larger than life.

I wonder if she is based on a living model who posed in an Austrian porcelain factory or classical Greek sculpture. She has been sculpted, molded, photographed, painted, circulated as a digital file, and printed. For all we know there could be a lineage stretching back thousands of years of artists, designers, and craftspeople who considered this very figure and how her hands interact with her hair; the hue of her lips, cheeks, and eyes; the relative detail or suggestion of her nipples. Each iteration has its own philosophical and political implications.

Considering art through the lens of gender often presumes the distinction or separation of the subject and the viewer.

As a female artist depicting a female subject, I experience a certain collapse in this distinction.

Collapse is also present in how the piece is painted. There are areas within the painting where the illusion of three-dimensional form in glazed surface is fairly convincing. Other areas bluntly reveal material truths. For the most part, it was a very thinly painted piece. Some of the highlights are not painted at all. They are untouched white ground. Here and there, you can see drips, blobs, and brushstrokes just nakedly being paint.

**Mickalene Thomas, Whatever You Want, 2004 (1:54)**

185#

Whatever You Want, 2004, one of the first portraits of Maya, my first muse, my girlfriend at the time. This painting is a part of an early series of works entitled, “She Works Hard For The Money.” I often photographed Maya

in our apartment in Bed-Stuy. The apartment had wood paneling, linoleum, and it often reminded me of areas in my family's houses.

This painting has Maya slightly leaning toward the viewer with her head leaned, her eyes beaming, gazed towards the viewer. All of my muses usually possess this particular gaze where they are inviting the viewer to look at them. The notion of looking at someone is to validate their existence. Maya is claiming her space. She is sitting on a couch gazing outward to the viewer.

As all muses in Greek mythology that inspired work of artists, this painting was inspired by various works of art; one being Tom Wesselmann's Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque made in 2003; inspired by Pam Grier from her movie Coffy in 1973; or Sheba, Baby that was made in 1975.

“She Works Hard For The Money” was a series I started in the early 2000s. It was a play on words that I use for myself and also for the notion of the women that I were portraying in my work; the fact that there is a sort of commerce with the making of the work and the selling of the work; the notion of what they are for, who’s gifting, and who’s receiving.

**Rozeal, Sacrifice #2: It Has to Last (after Yoshitoshi’s “Drowsy: the appearance of a harlot of the Meiji era”), 2007 (1:36)**

186#

Greetings, this is Rozeal Ras-X Blackmountain, formerly known as Iona Rozeal Brown. And this particular piece, Sacrifice #2: It Has to Last (after Yoshitoshi’s “Drowsy: the appearance of a harlot of the Meiji era”) features my late cat, Valentina. And even though Yoshitoshi is not known for featuring cats in many of his works, his master was, his

teacher was, Kuniyoshi. There is another work in this series, “The 32 Aspects of Daily Life,” that Yoshitoshi did, that does feature a cat called The Appearance of a Virgin in the Kansei Era and that particular piece is a young lady completely curled over playing with her cat.

This piece Sacrifice #2: It Has to Last, well that part of the title “It has to last” is from a Bernie Mac joke. The piece also was a moment for me to express the similarities that I saw across continents in the way that women sleep in precarious positions to maintain their elaborate hairstyles.

**Hayv Kahraman, Migrant. I, 2009 (1:52)**

187#

I was born in 1981 in Baghdad, Iraq, and I lived through two wars. The Iran-Iraq War right when I was born in 1981 and the First Gulf War in the early 1990s, after which I fled to Sweden as a refugee with falsified passport. And I

mention this because my work tends to be very violent and it also deals with the element of displacement and more often than not, it is a figure of a woman.

My work is very autobiographical, so these are sort of reiterations of my own body and I don't know it becomes a necessity for me to create agency for her and to sort of give her a voice and maybe this stems from living in a very violent environment and then having to sort of exist as a refugee in a Western context.

Migrant. I is part of a larger body of work that is titled Migrant. I through XV. Compositionally and formally, they are based on your, you know, average playing cards, so you would have this mirrored figure. What I wanted to really focus on here was the characters of immigrants and refugees, and so I really, I mean when I work I do a lot of research and with this particular body of work, I kind of just talked to my close family and my friends; all of them are

refugees, so there is this linear narrative in each one of these works where, you know, one figure represents the past life in their homeland and the mirrored figure is a representation of the current, present life as an immigrant.

**Josephine Meckseper, American Leg, 2010 (1:07)**

188#

American Leg, read by Samantha Mathis

Looking good while making bad decisions

Black hand in window

Touch to activate

People walking from A to B

In circles

Perpetually

On secret street

Stocking on heel

City bird on window sill

Do not hold doors

Period-proof underwear

Hard work

Tastes good

Single incision

Young men in shorts

All lights turned on

Passion for compassion

American leg

Not too much hair

Most insurances accepted

Arm reaching over

Touching breasts, slightly, like bird wings

This is a World Trade Center-bound C

## **Don & Mera Rubell discuss Rosemarie Trockel's art**

**(1:13)**

189#

(Mera) Rosemarie Trockel had to break through the glass ceiling in art because Germany was a real male artist chauvinist place and for a woman to break through, it took a lot. What she broke through with was the most identifiable materials and practice that was always attributed to women and that's craft and knitting, and it was almost like proof that they were not really great artists because, you see, what can a woman make? And so she went into the belly of the beast and worked with materials that were always a stereotype of woman's incapacity to be a great artist. She has now broken that ceiling and is one of the outstanding German artists of her time and a tremendous influence on other woman.

(Don) The curiosity is that the first piece that really stimulated our interest in Rosemarie Trockel was a knitted piece with images of swastikas on it. We questioned her on this because we were very upset. She said the reason she put the swastika in is growing up in Germany they never discussed World War II. It was an absent period in history and when they would study the history of Germany, that period was completely obliterated.

**Jennifer Rubell, Lysa III, 2014 (:54)**

190#

The nutcracker work came about after I saw this nutcracker online of Hillary Clinton where you put nuts between her legs and crack them. And I loved the idea of the act of cracking a nut being this kind of scary act of female power. And in this sculpture I wanted the viewer to be in the role of harnessing that kind of female power, but also coupling the more masculine political power of

someone like Hillary Clinton with also the sexual power of a classic pin-up. And so the model for the sculpture was a mannequin that is available online, whose name is Lysa, L-Y-S-A, she is the large-busted model, and it was re-cast and re-tooled so that the viewer could actually engage with the physical sculpture.

**Natasja Kensmil, Desperate Land, 2004 (1:04)**

191#

My imagery of fear and of anxiousness is derived from history, religion, and mythology, but also from the extremism of our time. For example, in my painting, Desperate Land from 2004, I was intuitively looking at the dark authority of religion and the way that way the people relate religion and mysticism. I was playing with the idea that God is a human fabrication to prevent him from bursting into beastliness. With this thought, I included in the painting a portrait of Rasputin, a religious maniac who

was surrounded by credulous people. I wanted to invoke a romantic image, the attraction of a figure that holds a group of followers spellbound and gives them shape as a group, but I also searched for the aestheticism of the horror, the horror of the holy war.

**Cecily Brown, Black Painting 4, 2003 (1:31)**

192#

This painting, Black Painting 4, was part of a series that I started around 2003. Each painting I make is trying to engage in an argument with the ones that came before. My other work at that time was very colorful and very abstract, and I wanted to challenge myself by severely reducing the palette and painting a clear figurative image.

The “Black Paintings” were almost entirely monochrome. I started with a black ground and only allowed myself the

barest touches of bright color. All the black paintings began with a pale supine figure on a dark ground.

The image of a reclining figure seemingly haunted by hallucinatory forms was loosely based on a late 19th-century print of a male figure hypnotized by erotic imagery that seems to float in the space above him.

In my painting, the fragmented imagery above and around the figure comes from multiple sources. The winged penises came from images and sculptures that I had first seen in Pompeii many years before, although they do also appear in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century erotica that I worked from many times. The fleshy knots of writhing paint suggest entwined bodies. They are almost like details from a more abstract painting embedded in the fabric of the scene. I was thinking of Fuseli and other Victorian fairy painting, and dreams in the unconscious, and the grotesque and the unknown.

When I made the first Black Painting, I had no idea I would end up making seven or eight of them. The subject held my attention for a long time and the formal investigation of black on black is something I am still engaged in today.

### **Don & Mera Rubell discuss Dana Schutz's art (1:34)**

193#

(Don) 2002 was the first time that we saw the work of Dana Schutz in the Zach Feuer Gallery. The gallery was, we presumed, empty, and Mera and I were looking at the paintings, and we said this is the worst paintings we have ever seen. And the next thing we know a voice behind us said she is so happy and we turned around and it was the artist, Dana Schutz. And one of the purposes of this painting was the fact that the style that the painting was done.

(Mera) I think what Dana was responding to is to hear two people discuss her painting without any kind of inhibition. It is interesting how receptive she was to then engage us in a real conversation about why we hated the painting. Now, actually, the painting you are looking at is not the painting that we hated. That is another painting that is in the catalogue from 2002.

Because of that open, honest conversation we had, she then invited to us to visit her in her studio at Columbia University where she was getting her master's degree in fine arts. And we entered a room, like a windowless closet, there was this painting hanging on the wall. It was inconceivable that she could invent so much color and so much dynamic expression and so much imagination in this windowless, airless space. And that is the painting that we have cherished and, actually, in 2003, it went off to the Venice Biennale. We often enjoy visiting the paintings in the various exhibitions they end up in. It is like visiting your children away from home.

**Celia Paul, St. Brigid's Vision, 2014–15 (:59)**

194#

St. Brigid is the Irish patron saint of pastures and pasturing animals. I read a legend where she was described as blind. After much prayer, she received the gift of sight for a split second. What she saw were the fields around her with animals grazing before her blindness returned. She said that the beauty of her vision would remain with her for the rest of her life.

I finished this painting, titled St. Brigid's Vision, soon after my mother's death. It has the fleeting quality of a vision, a light shining in the darkness. I think it is the ordinariness of what she saw that moved me. My mother was 87 when she died. She had sat for me for many portraits, and she had been my main sitter for over 30 years.

## **Mera Rubell discusses Anicka Yi's art (:54)**

195#

Anicka Yi is one of the younger artists in the show and, in many ways, she is just breaking barriers all over the place. We have lots and lots of children come to see our museum, and I can say that when they walked into the gallery with Anicka's work, they were astonished at the materials that this artist chooses. And I think it's mind expanding for these kids to think, wow, I can make art with fried tempura flowers. Fried tempura flowers can be art.

Anicka is always surprising us with the materials. And I think one of the things about the looking at art is you have to say, what do you see. I see a conversation about femininity and masculinity and the adventure of an artist seeking new materials to have that conversation.

## **Don & Mera Rubell discuss Jennifer Guidi's art (:58)**

196#

(Don) The work of Jennifer Guidi brings up an interesting point for all collectors because collectors tend to be classified as saying they love this type of work or they love that type of work. And I guess we are known for very emotionally, politically involved figurative work and yet we went into the studio, we saw this very minimal-appearing work, and it felt so strong and so powerful, and it made us feel good that we could see something that we normally wouldn't respond to, but that was so strong that we felt there was an urgency to adding this work to the collection.

(Mera) You have to see this work from a distance, but then, get really, really close to this work and appreciate that every single dot represents the signature, the hand movement of the artist. Once you see those dots, no one else can make that dot, I mean, how can a dot be a

signature, well it just is and look at the power and magic of this work.

**Karin Davie, Oh Baby #1 and #2 from the series**

**“Sidewalk,” 1992 (1:22)**

197#

Oh Baby #1 and #2 is a diptych painting from a series titled “Sidewalks.” It is a humorous image comprised of modernist stripes evoking a tightly covered body part and a wink to Op Art, pop culture, and the appropriated art-making concepts of the '80s.

I imagined making a bulging stripe painting suggesting an image viewed from behind or the anatomy of the human buttocks and the male gaze. I wanted there to be attention between what gets revealed and what gets concealed simultaneously. The canvas edge in each painting acts as a kind of container that is virtually too small for the bulging

image, so the image appears squashed and pushed up against the frame like a body trapped inside the stretcher bar or trapped inside the painting. We do not see what is underneath the stripes and can only imagine what is behind.

The lurid stripe color combinations I chose of blacks, greens, and browns alternate between yellows and burnt oranges to create an illusion of light and call attention to the hidden space within this sexualized image.

While the doubling and repetition of the image creates a dynamic and synchronized swaying movement back and forth between each canvas, it also suggests the idea of the double take.

As a child, I remember seeing a women's nylon advertisement of a giant swinging woman's backside in a store, and it left a huge impression on me.

## **Don & Mera Rubell discuss Yayoi Kusama's art (1:27)**

198#

(Don) How does a woman who has neither the desire nor the ability to live in the world deal with the world? In the case of Kusama, we have someone who lives, who chooses to live, in a semi-institutional setting and who, for the last 30 years, has chosen a very repetitive form to make her art. Now, in some strange way, the audience responds tremendously to this, responds with great emotional feelings, particularly young people, to this art, yet the art itself tends to be not emotional at all. I think one has to look at the art and try and feel the person who made this art.

(Mera) In some ways, Don, it is kind of a Zen experience. I think for her it is Zen, and for the viewer it becomes that. It is some kind of comfort one gets in an endless repetition in doing, it is like, maybe the comparison would be in like

hitting the perfect tennis ball all the time, over and over, and perfecting. It looks the same, but it actually changes with every stroke. Because, in fact, no one can ever do the same thing exactly the same way because of time and the nature of the human being, we can never repeat anything exactly. So, here is something that looks the same, is the same, but actually ever-changing. There is this comfort in the repetition bringing a certain kind of order to her universe and may be an order to our universe.

(Don) How do we find security in an insecure world?

**Shinique Smith, Menagerie, 2007 (1:15)**

199#

Hi! This is Shinique Smith. If you are hearing my voice, you must be viewing my work in the exhibition NO MAN'S LAND. My combinations of materials come from an array of sources, some material elements are very personal,

collected from my friends, my family, and at times my own closet.

For Menagerie, I used the existing pattern and color of fabrics in lieu of paint, which I often do in my work.

Created from pieces that I salvaged from past ephemeral works of cut paper, calligraphy, ink, and spray paint; various printed matter like posters that I found in the New York City subway; and combined with items from my then 2007 wardrobe, like my black-and-white gingham sundress; my purple floral skirt; my Baltimore Orioles T-shirt; and the bottom of my favorite-custom bleached jeans. In fact, listing these elements, I recall it must have been summer when I made the piece.

The collection of these materials in Menagerie, and perhaps all of my works, form a sort of diary of where I have been, the experiences I have had, and the beauty I find in everyday things.

**Cristina Iglesias, Untitled, L-4, 1986 (:58)**

200#

Some of my early pieces talk about hidden places, about impenetrability, about desire. They also talk about the way of looking, about distance, about closeness, about detail. The concrete can be colored, color as construction material, color added to gestures, the color as gesture in sculpture, pink like flesh, a place one could not enter, in between the walls, an inner place, a corner, a place of desire, a partially hidden place.

**Li Shurui, I am not ready..., 2013 (1:27)**

201#

(Artist's instrumental response to work.)

## **Mera Rubell discusses Li Shurui's art (:55)**

202#

In 2013, it was our eighth trip to China, we came on Li Shurui, to her studio, and she, in the abstractions that you see, which is quite unusual, actually abstractions are not the most popular form of art that is made in China, and women, although there are many in the art schools, are not actually the celebrated artists. There is a very tough ceiling to crack for woman in China. She takes on the urbanism, the brutality of urbanism in China: the pollution, the migrant workers, the water that you cannot drink, the extraordinary human hustle and traffic, pollution—and somehow in her abstraction, she creates this, maybe an emotional collage of this urbanism that is constantly in flux and changing in Beijing.

## **Li Shurui, Inner Rainbow, 2011 (1:31)**

203#

(Artist's instrumental response to work.)