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‘The Exhibit: Finding the Next Great Artist’ Review: Smithsonian Idol

Seven artists compete for a show at Washington’s Hirshhorn Museum and a \$100,000 prize in this strange and stagey reality series from MTV and the Smithsonian Channel.



Jennifer Warren in ‘The Exhibit’

PHOTO: PARAMOUNT

By *John Anderson*

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What a great idea: A work of conceptual art disguised as a TV show, one aimed at taking down both the art world and the stagnant state of competition television. A show that claims to “for the first time ever” have “accomplished artists from all over the country” pitted against each other for the “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to earn a “career-defining exhibit” at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum. A program staged like “The Great Half-Baked Baking Show.” What better bumper sticker for the zeitgeist than “Artists! One minute left!”

Alas. It seems, even after host Dometi Pongo’s carnival-barker intro, that “The Exhibit: Finding the Next Great Artist” is meant to be taken seriously. And that Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu’s entrance line (“Hello ah-tists!”) isn’t meant as an homage to Anna Delvey. Some mischievous fabricator might have hidden a critical time-bomb inside such a show, but that would be redundant: Inadvertently or not, the entire “Exhibit” treats modern art the way the Luftwaffe treated Guernica.

It’s easy to make fun of some of the efforts in episode 1 of “The Exhibit.” It seems like violating a commandment to coerce an artist into explaining his or her work, but most of it here is so obscure as to

demand explanation. The seven participants are generally a likable bunch, though the painters are nicer than the others and the further we get from representational work the more obnoxious the worker. That's a subjective judgment. But what's more concrete is the absurdity of pitting plastic artists against one another, under a deadline (10 hours), weaponizing their gifts and expecting something worthwhile to come of it.

The assignment in episode 1 is to create a commentary on shifting gender roles, which seems predictable enough to be satire. But the same stylistic devices employed on series about pie makers are used to portray creative artists like the clearly gifted Clare Kambhu, a painter and a teacher in New York schools. The show shoehorns their instincts—which is what ultimately distinguishes them—into ideas fashioned for the purposes of commercial television. If the objective of art is to provide a “view into what's happening in the world today,” as someone puts it, the artists should be doing that already. But not necessarily on the spur of the moment.

Describing her museum as the “wild child” of the Smithsonian institutional community, Ms. Chiu and her fellow judges (artist-critic Kenny Schachter and artist Adam Pendleton in episode 1) feed into every tired cliché about the obscurity and shallowness of modern work, and it is hard to watch the show and not think how easily it could be turned into propaganda for the enemies of art and arts funding. What's the counter-argument? Especially when the alleged champions of culture are treating their own field in so airy and frivolous a manner? The first assignment's theme of “disrupting masculine norms” leads one participant to create a “sexy, femme-presenting Botticelli banana” because we generally eat bananas that have no seeds. By all means, let us liberate the beseeded banana. While the project doesn't quite work out, it doesn't mean there isn't an idea at work. But it leaves the judges split.

Episode 2 (only two were made available for review) involves judges Samuel Hoi of the Maryland Institute College of Art and freelance digital strategist JiaJia Fei and a commission that “showcases the world's love affair with social media.” At this point, the collective audience may be looking at its phone. (The show will also air on Smithsonian Channel at 9 p.m. Tuesdays starting March 7, and moves to Friday nights at 10 on MTV beginning March 10.)

It's easy to feel sorry for the competitors, who are in an impossible situation but need the exposure as well as the \$100,000 that comes with the Hirshhorn showcase. You gain some respect for a couple of the early losers, because they make their disgruntlement quite evident. But do others need to be quite so gushing about their judges? “When it comes to contemporary art,” says one, “Melissa Chiu is the beginning and the end.” The end can't come too soon.

—*Mr. Anderson is the Journal's TV critic.*