

Review:
“Bureau of Aesthetics” at Kadist

Judging by what’s installed in Kadist’s street-facing windows, *Bureau of Aesthetics* appears at first to be an exhibition about Bay Area community engagement. A monitor loops a video by Sanctuary City Project (organized by San Francisco artists Sergio De La Torre and Chris Treggiari), repeating the phrase “UN / DOCUMENTED / UN / AFRAID” alongside text in the window noting ironically that the current director of ICE comes from an immigrant family fleeing systemic poverty. Other windows display broadsheets and ephemera from two radical Bay Area newspapers, the Slingshot Collective’s quarterly *Slingshot* and the Coalition on Homelessness’ *Street Sheet*. Beginning with these specific responses to social crises in the city of San Francisco, the exhibition opens out into more formal and abstract questions about infrastructure, networks, and visibility within art-world systems.

Inside, *Bureau of Aesthetics* is largely a show of work by Native Art Department International (NADI), an artist duo comprised of Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan (the exhibition is co-curated by Kadist and Kadist’s current resident, the artist-centered Toronto nonprofit Mercer Union). NADI chose to exhibit work made with regular collaborators, and to bring other collectives into the conversation by inviting them to add zines, artwork, and publications to a temporary library. These texts, which line a bookshelf near the building’s entrance, proffer a range of arguments and aesthetic approaches like a warm and energetic (if somewhat chaotic) chorus. As a result, *Bureau of Aesthetics* feels like an open-ended, spontaneous, and layered dialogue; and the ways that such configurations might be organized is one of the show’s underlying questions.

Themes of structure, collaborative action, and interpretation weave throughout NADI’s work here. The first piece sets the scene: *Double Shift* (2018), a two-person sweatshirt from a previous collaboration, forces the performers to coordinate their movements—in other words, to organize—in order to move forward. Other sculptures are specifically about frameworks and underpinnings in a literal sense, like *Construction* (2019), which nearly fills one gallery with wooden partitions that seem designed to display art but are covered in mylar blankets, those reflective beacons of emergency.

The text-heaviness of the window displays is echoed in the last gallery by videos that question legibility in its most pejorative sense, as a kind of too-easy interpretation that supports reductive thought; this “war against essentialism” has long been part of NADI’s explicit mission statement. *There Is No Them and Now; Only Is and Is Not* is a 2018 video made by NADI and artist Dennis Redmoon Darkeem. It splices together footage of Darkeem performing a traditional ceremonial dance with typewritten text describing his frustrations with white audiences who say he doesn’t look Native American to them. The impossibility of seeing the artist is reflected formally in the cinematography: Darkeem’s movements are filmed in close-up shots, so that the viewer can only see parts of him, never his whole figure at once. The structural positioning of the viewer suggests alternatives to easy consumption and judgment, and the piece offers a disciplined complication to the formats that so often allow a scene like this to be flattened or reduced.