

VAN DOREN WAXTER

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Tea, Delicate Lines and Sardonic Art

Tom Sachs, Hedda Sterne and David Hammons in this week's Fine Art
By **PETER PLAGENS** April 22, 2016



'Tea House' (2011-12) by Tom Sachs is part of his solo exhibition at the Noguchi Museum in Queens. PHOTO: TOM SACHS

Tom Sachs: Tea Ceremony

[The Noguchi Museum](#)

32-37 Vernon Blvd., Long Island City

(718) 204-7088

Through July 24

Tom Sachs (b. 1966) is an industrial-strength *enfant terrible* who combines the factory production of Jeff Koons (though on a smaller scale) with the take-it-or-leave assemblage style of Edward Kienholz. It seems odd, then, that the Noguchi Museum, which has been dedicated solely to the sublimely modernist art of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) since its opening in 1985, would choose Mr. Sachs to be the first outside artist to enjoy a solo exhibition here.

The nominal—and somewhat offensive, if you think about it—rationale for the show is that Noguchi was of Japanese heritage on his father's side (his mother was a white American), and the subject of Mr. Sachs's rambling exhibition, which wanders through the museum's entire ground floor, is the ancient Japanese tea ceremony. Earlier this year, Mr. Sachs told *Vogue* that the tea ceremony is a "500-year-old tradition mired in dogma for the elite. You have to be a wealthy person to have the time."

This takedown attitude generates some arresting pieces (a crudely faceted pool of live carp, which kids love, and a rough full-size replica of an airliner restroom that reminds viewers they'd have to fly to get to Japan) as well as a few chuckles (a bottle of hand sanitizer at a small fountain, lots of

teacups with NASA logos on them). But it's as woefully out of place in this institution as a monster truck rally would be next door to *aconcours d'elegance*.



Hedda Sterne's 'Yellow Machine' (1950) PHOTO:CHARLES BENTON/VAN DOREN WAXTER/THE HEDDA STERNE FOUNDATION/ARS, NEW YORK, NY

Hedda Sterne: Machines 1947-1951

[Van Doren Waxter](#)

23 E. 73rd St., (212) 445-0444

Through May 7

If the name Hedda Sterne conjures up anything, it is likely to be the famous 1950 photograph, later published in *Life* magazine, of "The Irascibles." They were a group of artists protesting the Metropolitan Museum of Art's ignoring abstraction in its exhibitions, and they were also all men—including the likes of Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline—except for one woman, dressed in black and positioned highest in the rear: Sterne.

Unlike Pollock or Rothko, outside that photo Sterne (1910-2011) exists only for a limited audience. Her work—in this exhibition, abstracted Surrealism inspired by farm machinery she saw in Vermont—got lost in the bombastic shuffle of New York School machismo. And even though one of her paintings (alas, not one of her best), "New York, N.Y., 1955," was included in the new Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition last year, Sterne has remained in the background of 20th-century art history.

With some allowance for time and place (she arrived in America from Romania in 1941 and thought the country itself was overwhelmingly surreal) and for physical modesty (these are small, high-key paintings and drawings with lots of delicate lines), Sterne emerges here as a painter with a quietly convincing presence.



David Hammons's 'Bird' (1990) PHOTO: TOM POWEL/DAVID HAMMONS/MNUCHIN GALLERY

David Hammons: Five Decades

[Mnuchin](#)

45 E. 78th St., (212) 861-0020

Through May 27

The art world today is filled to overflowing with bright-idea, quick-execution art—usually assemblage or collage, although some “zombie formalism” (imagine a graffiti-covered Mark Rothko with one stretcher bar removed) qualifies. What is it, then, that elevates the nominally similar work of David Hammons (b. 1943)—a MacArthur “genius grant” winner in 1991—so far above the pack that it seems as if he’s landed from another planet, equipped with X-ray vision and telepathy, hoisting our foibles about race and class with a variety of pithy petards?

It’s simply old-fashioned talent, which in this case is an artist-provocateur’s equivalent of, say, Richard Serra’s unerring sense of weight and scale. Mr. Hammons has demonstrated this since the 1980s: selling snowballs outside Cooper Union in 1983, constructing 30-foot-high basketball hoops in Brooklyn and calling them “Higher Goals” in 1986, and painting Jesse Jackson with blond hair and white skin in “How Ya Like Me Now?” in 1988.

In Mnuchin’s selective reprise, Mr. Hammons repeatedly demonstrates a wicked subversiveness that’s as sharp as one of those Miyabi knives that you don’t know has cut you until you see the blood on your hand. Almost all the 30-odd pieces in the show have some kind of sociopolitical charge, but a few are especially compelling and poetic. “Bird” (1990), for example, is a 6-foot-tall birdcage stand holding a basketball and a few feathers encased in chicken wire. The work effectively alludes to Charlie Parker, the way basketball is enshrined in the black community, and polite white people propping it all up. The work is unabashedly sardonic, and so, too, is the presence of the whole exhibition in a blue-chip gallery ensconced in an Upper East Side townhouse. Don’t think for a minute Mr. Hammons doesn’t know this.