The 2017 James and Audrey Foster Prize Exhibition
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

This year's Foster Prize exhibition highlighted the best of what Boston has to offer to artists working in the city: a proximity to researchers. All of the works on display—many created by artist-professors—borrowed modes of inquiry from the research sciences and involved collaborations with area research institutions. Most Boston-based artists migrated to the city to attend or teach at the myriad universities that characterize the city, and that makes for Boston's abundance of opportunities in finding collaborators across disciplines. Sonia Almeida, Jennifer Bornstein, Lucy Kim, and Lucien Castra-Taylor & Verena Paravel engaged with interlocutors in fields as disparate as linguistics, genetics, and anthropology from Harvard, MIT, and beyond to produce work of academic rigor and committed to inquiry.

The biennial Foster Prize awards an honorarium to Boston-based artists and funds the production of new work, which is then displayed at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. As ICA director Jill Medvedow notes, the prize and exhibition "shine a light on a selection of established Boston-based artists working at a national and international level, but whose work has only received limited exposure here at home." Although proximity to major institutions provides avenues of inquiry for the artists in the exhibition, the limited local exposure that Medvedow alludes to is also a symptom of the cultural economy in an institution-heavy, top-down city, which may excel at research but largely fails to create space for young artists and experimental practices. Yet the works exhibited by Kim, Bornstein, Almeida, and Castra-Taylor & Paravel made clear how fruitful—and necessary—collaboration between (experimental) artist and (established) institution can be. This year's prize and exhibition, organized by Dan Byers with Jeffrey De Blois, astutely celebrates such a crossover, ideally it will cause others to follow suit, encouraging Boston to invest and trust in the experiments of its artistic community.

Featured in Kim's series of portraits is Eric S. Lander, the director of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. Lander helped lead the Human Genome Project—the world's largest collaborative biological study, intended to map all human genes. Kim mentioned her desire to work with a geneticist to a local friend, and that friend happened to have worked for Lander—a uniquely Bostonian coincidence. Lander agreed to let Kim do a live cast of his face, as did plastic surgeon Melissa Doft and Stephen Marino—Kim's personal trainer. All three individuals used the body as a medium—be it through shaping DNA, muscles, tissue, or skin—and Kim, in turn, used their bodies as her medium. The human body has, of course, preoccupied artists and scientists alike for millennia, albeit at times by different means and with different goals. In Kim's work, these aims and means coalesce.

Castra-Taylor & Paravel maintain a practice at once artistic and anthropological at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab—an experimental facility that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. Comprising foot- age shot with GoPro cameras affixed to fishermen and their tools, their film Leviathan (2012) offers an intimate view aboard a commercial fishing vessel in nearby New Bedford, MA. This approach could be seen as a documentary effort, an attempt to achieve an objective view, in that it minimizes the cameras' presence by

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Lucy Kim, Dr. Eric Lander, Genetist 2 (Detail), 2017, oil and acrylic paint, urethane resin, epoxy, fiberglass, foam, wood framing, 92 x 60 inches [Photo: John Kennard; courtesy of the artist and Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston]
rendering them nearly invisible, and by removing the cameraperson and thus minimizing the subject’s performativity. The viewer is plunged in and out of the water, positioned as a fishing rod, lending the piece—in its nonlinear, wordless, edited form—an undeniable poetry. It’s easy and tempting to read poetic and humanistic themes into the film—themes such as labor, ecology, industry, and “humankind versus nature.” The film makes no explicit comment, but perhaps tacitly captures the literary history of New Bedford—which served as the opening setting for Moby Dick—by “objective” means.

Bornstein’s work is a homage to her late father, a scientist. Displayed alongside the artist’s rubbings of his personal objects were the material traces left by his proudest scientific achievement: the mice he genetically modified. Bornstein’s father was born with overly loose ligaments; his mice, similarly, were modified to be especially flexible. The artist often struggled to empathize with her father’s relationship to his scientific work, she has said, but when she saw how proud he was of his mice, she also saw an analogue to her artistic practice. Like Kim, Bornstein mentioned her interest in these genetically modified mice, in passing, to a local scientist friend, who was able to find the type almost instantly. The resulting work, displayed at the ICA, considered the genetically modified animals as having an author, which was how the artist’s father reflected himself in his research, and the analogous emotional investments people make in their practices as artists, and as scientists.

Raq’s Media Collective, Re-run, 2013, video still (courtesy of the artists)

To refuse/To wait/To sleep

Morris & Helen Belkin Art Gallery,
Vancouver, Canada

The politics of refusal has gained an intensified polynomy since last year’s vertiginous and seismic political shifts, with recent acts of protest (the international Women’s Day strikes, chants of “not my president”) mobilizing it as both strategy and ethos. This radical posture of refusal is invoked by a recent group exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery titled To refuse/To wait/To sleep (January 13–April 9, 2017). Organized by curator Lorna Brown, the exhibition relayed a sense of contemporary urgency in its conceptual framing, which according to the curatorial statement revolved around speculative inquiries into “economic models, precarious labor and illicit and marginalized markets”—terms that are seductive and a la courant, but potentially over-determining as a curatorial premise.

The first work one encountered at the Belkin was both imposing and marginal: specially commissioned for the show, it was a billboard-sized banner by Marianne Nicolson that hung outside the gallery on a high corner of its façade. Nicolson, who is of First Nations and Scottish descent, derives the material for her art from a research-based practice of mining colonial histories. This work, titled The Sun is Setting on the British Empire (2017), traces the history of the current design for British Columbia’s flag, in which the Union Jack triumphs above a sinking sun. Nicolson confronts this imperial imagery with indigenous symbolism, scrambling visual elements across divergent value systems.