

# ‘Soft Power’: When Political Art Walks a Very Fine Line

An exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art shows the limits of “soft power” at a time when museums are being transformed by hard activism.



Tanya Lukin Linklater and Liz Lott’s “The treaty is in the body,” a digital photograph from 2017. Tanya Lukin Linklater and Winnipeg Art Gallery.

**By Karen Rosenberg**

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An ambitious survey of contemporary art at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, “[Soft Power](#)” dusts off a Reagan-era term for cultural diplomacy and applies it to political art being made today.

The show, featuring 20 artists from 12 countries, feels of a piece with the most recent Whitney Biennial in casting artists as engaged citizens, savvy persuaders and skilled communicators. And like the Whitney exhibition, it occasionally rubs up against the limits of “soft power” at a moment when museums, among other institutions, are being transformed by hard activism.

“Soft Power” is, at the very least, a transformation of [SFMoMA’s](#) programming to a more contemporary and global outlook. The museum’s biggest exhibition to date, it is the first one organized by Eungie Joo, who became SFMoMA’s first curator of contemporary art in 2017 and has an impressive track record of international festivals including the Sharjah Biennial in 2015 and the New Museum’s well-received 2012 Triennial.

This show sprawls over the museum’s fourth and seventh floors, wrapping much-needed diversity and little jolts of anarchy around the blue-chip [Fisher collection](#). One of the first works you’ll encounter is an empty, carpeted gallery with a gridded, fluorescent-lit ceiling that seems to be coming undone, courtesy of the Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle, who has said the skewed tiles overhead reflect childhood memories of economic crisis.



Cinthia Marcelle’s “There is No More Place in This Place,” from 2019. Cinthia Marcelle and Galeria Vermelho; Ian Reeves

The exhibition is oddly circumspect about the use (and misuse) of “soft power” on the social media platforms being shaped in the nearby office parks of Mountain View and Menlo Park. There’s a brief nod in the opening text, which cites “social media producers, university professors, and contemporary artists” as today’s

wielders of soft power. But visitors may leave wanting to know more about those producers, or the relationship between soft power and big data — in short, about the new avenues for political influence and persuasion.

Instead, what we see in “Soft Power” are artists emerging as expert, if sometimes slick, “storytellers,” a term now co-opted by marketing parlance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s engrossing and transparently sentimental video installation, “The Specter of Ancestors Becoming.” Using multiple narrators, screens and languages, Mr. Nguyen, the co-founder of the [Propeller Group](#), explores complicated family histories within the Vietnamese community in Senegal, which can be traced back to French colonial soldiers who returned from the front with Vietnamese wives and children.



Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s “The Specter of Ancestors Becoming” (2019); still from four-channel video installation. Tuan Nguyen and James Cohan

LaToya Ruby Frazier’s “Flint is Family, Part II” (2017-19) does a lot with the old-fashioned form of the black-and-white photo essay. It follows a woman and her daughter, Shea Cobb and Zion, as they flee the Flint water crisis and begin a new life on Shea’s father’s farm in Mississippi (enacting a Great Migration in reverse). An especially poignant image shows both mother and daughter

leaning over a stream, cupping water in their hands.

Several of the exhibition's artists act as anthropologists or unofficial ambassadors, immersing themselves in remote or isolated communities. The results are edifying, even if they seem to be more outreach than art. In her two-part quasi-documentary film, "Who is Afraid of Ideology?," the Beirut artist Marwa Arsanios interviews Kurdish female freedom fighters and members of an eco-feminist commune in northern Syria. Her catalog essay builds on this research, suggesting that N.G.O.s hoping to assist refugees have much to learn from the women in that region's battle for autonomy.

Other examples abound of women's groups as keepers of tradition or vital information: soft power as female power, historically speaking. [Tanya Lukin Linklater's video "The treaty is in the body,"](#) invites viewers into a gathering of women from the Omaskêko Cree nation as they explore the treaty relationships that are fundamental to their culture. The work is silent, but its many intimate gestures — one woman braids another's hair — resound with shared understanding.



Shea Cobb and her daughter, Zion, drinking from their freshwater spring in Jasper County, Newton, Miss., in LaToya Ruby Frazier's series "Flint is Family II," 2017.  
LaToya Ruby Frazier and Gavin Brown's enterprise



Pratchaya Phinthong's "A whole from a different half," 2018. Pratchaya Phinthong and gb agency; Glen Cheriton

A respite from all the film and photo-based works can be found on the fourth floor, where paintings and installations use image fragments loaded with histories of exchange. Inkjet-printed tepee coverings by Duane Linklater (the husband of Tanya and a member of the Omaskeko Cree) derive their floral imagery from the 17th-century goods traded by the Cree and English settlers. And the Beirut artist Haig Aivazian's mixed-media installation "Rome Is Not in Rome (Part II: Mythology to Abbatoirs)" merges relics of past empires with new landmarks of cultural diplomacy (including a model of the Louvre Abu Dhabi).

Soft power implies a slow, patient process. One exception: a brief and bracing film in which the artist Pratchaya Phinthong sets on fire methane hydrate, a frozen greenhouse gas found under ocean beds and permafrost; it is being debated as a possible energy source even as it could accelerate climate change.

Ms. Joo issues her own call to action, in the show's news release: "I trust the public can relate to many of the concerns of the artists in 'Soft Power,' and hope that this exhibition will unleash an untapped energy among us."

Here we feel the inadequacy of soft power, and “Soft Power.” In the past year, the art world has seen real change effected by conventional activist tactics of protest and organizing: the [resignation of Warren B. Kanders](#) from the Whitney’s board after several artists pulled their work from the Biennial; the successful [unionization of staff at the New Museum](#) after preparations for a strike; and [the rejection of Sackler family money](#) by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, the Tate Modern and other museums after a series of protests led by the artist Nan Goldin raised awareness of the family’s connections to the opioid crisis. The nuanced, intuitive approach of the art in “Soft Power” has much to recommend it, but it’s no substitute for speaking truth to power.