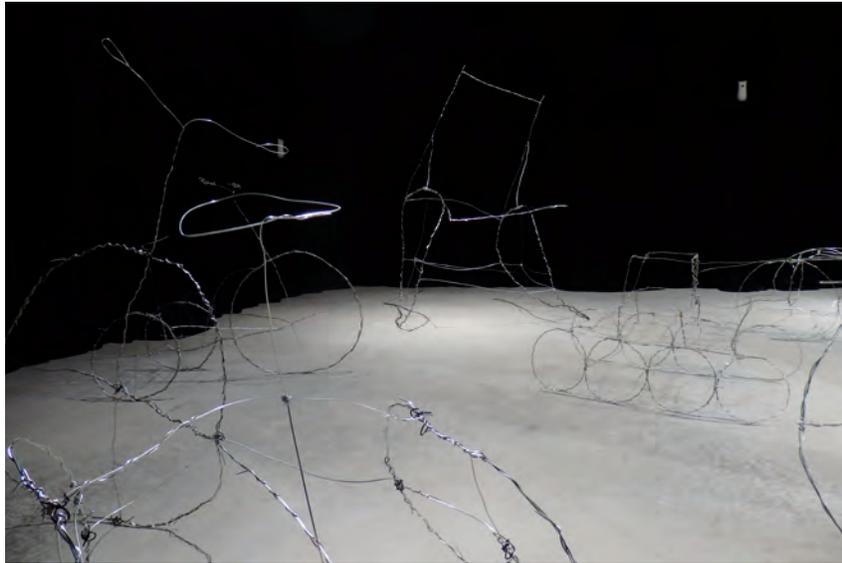


Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Amalia Ulman's exhibition "Stock Images of War," 2015, at James Fuentes.

AMALIA ULMAN

James Fuentes

To enter Amalia Ulman's first solo show in New York, called "Stock Images of War," you had to push aside a tall black curtain while listening to Rage Against the Machine and the Bloodhound Gang—the kind of aggressive rock music favored by someone who decorates a bedroom with posters of swimsuit models and smokes from a plastic bong. There were more curtains inside, completely covering the walls, and a few spotlights to illuminate the body of work that anchored the show—a series of spindly and wonky metal-wire sculptures. Air fresheners dispensed a baked-apple-strudel scent. It could have been a torture chamber or interrogation room, or your own personal hell.

Ulman's sculptures are airy and light but almost feel treacherous, as they look like they're on the verge of collapse and the wire they're made from vaguely seems barbed. Each of these works renders a wheeled vehicle: tricycle, wheelchair, tank, automobile. While walking among them, you started to think about all the people a war affects: a child on a bike, a soldier in a tank, a wheelchair-ridden veteran. The sculptures benefited immensely from the show's theatrical context. If you singled one out and imagined it without the surrounding chaos, the craftsmanship suggested something a Sarah Lawrence sophomore might have made for a 3-D assignment.

Encountering means of movement under a banner of wartime art led you to reflect on the meaning of everyday life in a world constantly at war. The tabloids we look at, the music on the radio and the food we eat can all be seen as facets of the production of a generic and tacky military-industrial complex.

Even with the noise and smell, the room seemed absolutely still and quiet, as if you could hear a bullet shell hit the ground with absolute clarity. After being in the installation for a bit, you started to feel claustrophobic and uneasy. The sculptures were hard to see, so you tiptoed around, hoping not to step on a land mine. The dramatic curtains and the spotlights made you feel as if you'd suddenly gotten stage fright in a one-person play.

Yet moments of fantasy occasionally broke through the bleak surface. If you caught a wire chair from just the right angle, it glimmered. The canned apple-pie smell became a warming whiff of Americana. "Maybe I should have given the Bloodhound Gang a chance," you might have thought to yourself. "This song is honestly kinda tight."

—Dan Allegretto