

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Hyperallergic

A More Expansive Understanding of What It Means to Be Human

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N.H.I., short for No Humans Involved, was an acronym used by the LAPD to refer to “young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos.”



Image: ‘No Humans Involved’, installation view, featuring Wilmer Wilson IV at the Hammer Museum. All photos by Jeff McClane.

LOS ANGELES — In the court proceedings following the 1991 beating of Rodney King, the public learned of an acronym routinely used by the Los Angeles Police Department to refer to “young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos”: N.H.I., short for No Humans Involved. The acronym became the starting point for Jamaican writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter to pull apart what it means to be human in her seminal 1994 essay “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to my Colleagues,” as well as the title for the exhibition currently

on view at the Hammer Museum. Curated by Erin Christovale and Vanessa Arizmendi, No Humans Involved is a visual continuation of Wynter’s critical reassessment, centering the point of view of Black and brown artists — the very voices originally deemed unfit to be considered human.



Image: ‘No Humans Involved’, installation view, featuring SANGREE at the Hammer Museum

The group of seven artists all reconsider the theme through equally compelling visions: the duo SANGREE, for example, reframe human origin stories with their installation of whimsical artifacts recalling Aztec civilizations and ethnographic displays, while Wilmer Wilson IV presents two versions of a letter calling for African American human rights to be recognized, each one engraved into monumental salt blocks, thus confronting the persistent gap in the way in which humanity has been narrated and self-narrated over time. However, the strongest visual throughline in the exhibition evokes skin — blown up across Sondra Perry’s lenticular panels, filtered through skylight and WangShui’s sci-fi lens, and stitched back together in Tau Lewis’ garment-like constructions — as if these artists are ripping apart humanity’s casing and taking apart its guts in order to examine its makeup and

reconstitute what it has the capacity to mean. By embracing the “nonhuman” as a point of departure instead of having to justify or prove the humanity of its artists, the exhibition succeeds in presenting a more generative, more expansive definition of what humanity is allowed to look and feel like.



Image: ‘No Humans Involved’, installation view, featuring Sondra Perry at the Hammer Museum.

No Humans Involved continues at the Hammer Museum (10899 Wilshire Boulevard, Westwood, Los Angeles) through January 9, 2022. The exhibition is curated by Erin Christovale, associate curator, with Vanessa Arizmendi, curatorial assistant.