

## ART REVIEW

## ***ART REVIEW; One Museum, Five Shows and a Million Lives and Passions***

By **Holland Cotter**

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The Bronx Museum of the Arts is one of the city's more animated and resilient cultural spaces. A quick subway ride from Manhattan, it stands on the Grand Concourse, surrounded by Art Deco apartment buildings whose imposing facades are reminders of days when the neighborhood was upscale and middle-class.

Times have changed. The residents are now mostly working-class, and though once white, are now black, Latino and Asian-American, members of New York's fastest growing ethnic populations. And because the Bronx Museum's exhibitions reflect its constituency, this institution is an important player in shaping New York art of both the present and the future.

The museum's activities can be sampled in two separate venues this summer. Four concurrent exhibitions are filling every available corner of its Bronx headquarters. And in Manhattan, a selection from its permanent collection is on view in the lobby galleries of the PaineWebber building on the Avenue of the Americas.

Most of the work in the PaineWebber show, which has been organized by Marysol Nieves, consists of prints and photographs gathered in loose thematic categories. A section devoted to portraiture, for example, suggests the staggering variety that the genre encompasses, from Byron Kim's abstract work using flesh-colored makeup to Tseng Kwong Chi's photograph of himself in a Mao suit at Disneyland.

Images dealing with the interrelated ideas of labor and servitude are equally diverse. They include Luis Jimenez's social realist print of a Latino steelworker, Lynne Yamamoto's hand-inscribed vellum scroll commemorating her Japanese grandmother's life as a laundress in Hawaii, and a large-scale woodcut by Willie Cole that transforms the shape of an ironing board into a diagram of a slave ship.

Throughout the show, such conceptual points are delivered with persuasive understatement, whether in works by artists who show regularly in Manhattan galleries (Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Alison Saar, Carrie Mae Weems) and by others who do not. One of the outstanding entries is Ester Hernandez's "Offering" (1988), a silk-screen of the Virgin of Guadalupe tattooed on a woman's back. Another is Dihn Q. Le's collage of Buddha heads, Netherlandish Pietas and self-portraits, pieced together in a mosaiclike grid of cutup photographs and tape.

Works by Pacita Abad, Antonio Frasconi, Gerardo Suter, Kuozhong Lee, Alberto Rey, Elizabeth Rodriguez, Carlota Espinoza and Benjamin Varela round out a polished group. And nothing combines formal beauty and ideological passion more seamlessly than a hand-colored lithograph by Juan Sanchez in which the luminous face of the Puerto Rican freedom fighter Pedro Albizu Campos is set among spiraling Taino pictographs and Roman Catholic emblems of the Sacred Heart.

An installation by Mr. Sanchez, "1898: Rican/Struction, Multilayered Impressions," is on view at the Bronx Museum itself. Lamenting colonial intrusion and fervently calling for national self-determination for Puerto Rico, the piece includes paintings and texts, videos and slide projections, with a continuous soundtrack of recited poetry, television news reports and the sound of weeping. All these elements run together with a kind of all-or-nothing urgency, and if the separate strands are hard to unravel, that's part of Mr. Sanchez's point.

Two ambitious mid-career surveys can be found in larger galleries. One, organized by Lydia Yee, is a selection of work by Tomie Arai, a New York-born artist of Chinese and Japanese descent. In the 1970's, Ms. Arai, then a member of the Asian-American art collective known as the Basement Workshop, directed community mural projects in Chinatown; in the mid-80's she shifted to printmaking, a medium that has, like murals, traditionally dealt with topical subjects and had a potential for widespread popular visibility.

The remarkable color silk-screens in the show incorporate portraits of the artist's family and friends as well as archival pictures of other Asian-Americans. Ms. Arai often places the figures against a gridlike map of Chinatown and surrounds them with a constellation of culturally loaded images, from decorative gift paper and eating utensils to examples of racial stereotypes drawn from the mass media.

The results are examinations, at once archival and critical, of precious and embattled lives that often go unchronicled. And the same recording impulse lies behind the show's most recent piece, a room-filling installation, the result of Ms. Arai's work with the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in Manhattan on an oral history project.

Titled "Double Happiness," a Chinese idiom for marriage, it consists of tables and chairs arranged for a Chinese wedding banquet. Silk-screened portraits of the invited sitter appear on the back of the chairs, along with their own comments on their bicultural lives. The words speak more often of discontinuity and isolation than of the bliss of bonding, but here, as in all of Ms. Arai's work, mixed messages are delivered with a slow-acting formal grace.

On view in an adjoining gallery is a mid-career showcase of the 54-year-old Uruguayan-born artist Rimer Cardillo, including prints, assemblages and large-scale installations. Like that of Ms. Arai, his art is essentially about preservation and loss. But where her concerns are predominantly urban and communal, his center on nature and on the precarious status of indigenous species and cultures in the Americas.

His hand-tooled boxlike constructions holding specimens of butterflies and bits of wood look like elaborate reliquaries. And the show's largest piece, "Cupi IV," is a huge cone of dirt sitting in the center of the gallery and studded with the terra cotta casts of dead animals he found either while traveling in South America or near his present home in upstate New York.

Some of the larger installations in the show are overly complicated, and lose coherence and impact. But when Mr. Cardillo concentrates on a single, resonant image -- the photograph of a sea turtle brought to market by Indians to be sold for food, the sculptural form of an Aztec fertility goddess projected in silk-screen on the museum's lobby windows -- the results are powerful.

Installed in the basement gallery is the 18th annual "Artists in the Marketplace" exhibition, always worth catching. The 36 artists, all of whom participated in a program of career-oriented seminars at the museum during the last year, are a cosmopolitan group, hailing from, among other places, Brazil, Cambodia, Finland, Indonesia, Japan and Trinidad. Most are young, but they aren't exactly wet behind the ears. Their work is sophisticated, carefully thought through and fully aware (a trifle too aware in some cases) of current art trends.

Generally speaking, the art this year is compact in format, personal and low-key in tenor. There is lots of photography of all kinds, from portraits (Katharina Bosse, Anthony Goicolea, Caroline Hastie) to still lifes (Alyshia Galvez's moving pictures of her dead father's possessions and Ana Kariotakis's tiny, weird shots of a lifelike doll), from abstract (Amy M. Bay) to setup (Suzy Kim) to quasi-documentary (Khang Han Hei, Daniel Mirer, Joseph Songco).

And there are artists who are stretching the medium in all kinds of directions and whose work is most accurately described as photo-derived. Stephen Sollins, Francesco Simeti, Eiko Kijima, Amy Eckert, Terry E. Boddie and Heidi I. Nash-Siedlecki are among them.

In painting, Nicole Awai's images are big, bright and political, but much of the other work is abstract, including mixed-media pieces by Bushra Chaudry, Colleen Ho (a towering collage of paint and doilies), Derek Weiler and Sonita Singwi (her beautiful little paintings of brushy tracery are among the best things in the show). And drawing takes a bow in Matthew Deleget's radiating Op-artish abstractions and Daniel Feingold's smudgy, erased forms on a soiled white ground.

Sculpture this year favors similarly delicate, tentative effects, with a distinct emphasis on craft techniques and domestic images. This is most obvious in the crocheted pieces by Hildur Bjarnadottir and Nancy Friedemann. But it is also true of the little cushions of stitched organza by Leigh Winter; in the organic, fruit-and-veggie forms of Beth Cora Lipman and Miggy Buck, and in Elia Alba's twisting curtain of blood-red cloth shut in a wire cage.

Even installation, often reserved for big statements, speaks with a quiet, often witty voice, particularly in Jennifer Krauss's neat-as-a-pin upholstered sofa ensconced inside a Hotpoint refrigerator. Stephanie Patton, Melissa Potter, Nadine Robinson and Brad Rothrock all have things of varying interest to say in this genre. And a piece by Xiomara De Oliver is a standout, not for its host of filament-suspended, charred dolls, but for the accompanying, and really arresting, collage-style poetry, which could easily take on a life of its own.

This is a lively, often accomplished selection, much of it more than just promising. It is worth noting that several of the prominent artists included in the PaineWebber exhibition -- Mr. Kim, Mr. Ligon, Ms. Yamamoto -- as well as Ms. Arai, are Artists in the Marketplace graduates. Their young and future peers are being similarly nurtured at the Bronx Museum today, making this institution a regular, mandatory stop on any art lover's itinerary.

"Histories (Re)membered: Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Bronx Museum of the Arts" remains at the PaineWebber Art Gallery, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, at 52d Street, Manhattan, through Sept. 11 (Mondays through Fridays, 8 A.M. to 6 P.M.).

Four exhibitions are at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania. "Tomie Arai: Double Happiness" and "Rimer Cardillo: Araucaria" will remain on view there through Aug. 23. "1898: Rican/Struction, Multilayered Impressions" and "Artists in the Marketplace: 18th Annual Exhibition" will remain through Sept. 27.

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