

September 2, 2005

Latino Art, and Beyond Category

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At its most vapid, talk about contemporary art is marketing talk, hem-length talk, trend talk. Painting is back. Pleasure is in. Like that. And because trends are cyclical, there's always a "new" to talk about, even though it's old.

Ideas about art, as distinct from styles, also come and go. But they can be tenacious. Their vogue may pass, but they still shape art in fundamental ways. Historians writing decades from now will surely note the lingering impact of 20th-century multiculturalist thinking on early 21st-century art. And they will acknowledge the way identity politics, and its aesthetic of marginality, continued to transform visual culture long after being absorbed into it and rendered effectively obsolete.

We see this absorption in process in two large museum group shows that are serving as prequels to the new season. One, "The (S) Files/The Selected Files 2005," is at El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan; the other, "AIM 25/Artist in the Marketplace," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

El Museo del Barrio was established in 1969 by a group of New York artist-activists, most of them of Puerto Rican descent, who felt themselves excluded from New York City's major cultural institutions. After a decade as a neighborhood fixture in East Harlem, the museum moved to Fifth Avenue and expanded its mission to embrace art of the entire Caribbean and Latin America. More recently it has been working hard to establish an international presence, while continuing to describe itself as "New York's leading Latino cultural institution."

Embedded in this institutional ambition is a changing concept of what "Latino art" means. And "The (S) Files," the museum's modest biennial, now in its fourth edition, is a fair indicator of what that change looks like.

Organized by Deborah Cullen, director of El Museo's curatorial programs; Miki Garcia, executive director of the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum; and Marysol Nieves, curator of contemporary art at Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, the exhibition was drawn mostly from unsolicited proposals submitted by artists in the greater New York area. The resulting show - clean, well-schooled, coolish, with solid work, if no obvious center - is therefore shaped to some extent by the play of chance. But it also seems to reflect a continuing curatorial effort to break down the notion of Latino art and artists as a fixed category and to demonstrate its integration into the art world mainstream.

All but absent, at least at first glance, are elements that once virtually defined art as Latino, at least in New York: religious imagery, a rhetoric of political resistance and nostalgia for a rooted, preimmigration life. Actually, all of this is still in place, but in new ways. Far from taking the "Latino" out of art, much of the work simply presents it sotto voce, as a subliminal, oblique, even optional content.

This content is all but invisible in several Minimalistic works. A delightful sculpture-and-sound piece by Delia Gonzalez and Gavin Russom, for example, looks like a cross between a mirrored Art Deco vanity, a set of Donald Judd boxes and space age furniture with a programmed hum. Only the addition of two bunches of sequined grapes suggests a link to the altars of popular religions related to Ms. Gonzalez's Cuban heritage.

David Cabrera's contributions are sparer still. Four collages of cut-paper flowers or stars on a solid ground have a gentle Matissian bounce. Six printed digital "paintings," composed of horizontal bands in indeterminate brown, white and blue, bring to mind Agnes Martin and slightly soiled flags. Once you learn that all the work is based on fabric patterns that the California-born artist remembers his mother and sister wearing in the 1960's, many other references open. Suddenly, pop abstraction becomes art about personal memory.

An ethereal sculpture by Milton Rosa-Ortiz, made from hundreds of clear glass shards suspended by filaments, is also a memory-piece, memory in this case being historical. Although Mr. Rosa-Ortiz has arranged the fragments in the shape of a cumulus cloud, an abstract harbinger of fair weather, the glass was gathered from the beach in Puerto Rico where invading United States forces landed at the beginning of the Spanish-American War.

Mr. Rosa-Ortiz is by no means alone in approaching art as a kind of critical, materialized poetry. Fay Ray does so in cancerous-looking collages made from images of gems cut from magazines; and Alfonso Muñoz in a photograph of a dark-skinned doll armed with a tiny ax, and set like a vengeful imp in a forest of antique silverware.

Even didactic pieces deliver their messages with an eye to entertainment, as in Carlos Aponte's clever graphic coding of machismo, and Michael Paul Britto's "Ghetto Games," a video that turns an image of children playing on a found mattress into a slow-motion ballet. Carlos Motta catches the psychological manipulations of military training in an evocative merging of image and spoken text. Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, in her video "Blowback," uses horror movie scores to accompany a spectral army of global refugees marching through Central Park.

And a few artists subject old-school identity politics to an update. Jesús Negrón, known as Bubu, one of four Puerto Rican artists picked by Ms. Nieves, tackles the overworked theme of Latino spirituality by turning a religious pilgrimage into a bruising, barhopping binge. Ostensibly honoring a promise he made to his mother to quit drinking, he traveled from Puerto Rico to Mexico, penitently lugging her wheelchair with him and drinking all the way. He documents his via crucis with an archive of photographs, a video and a relic: the wheelchair itself.

In place of a huddled-masses view of immigration, Chio Flores offers, in a wall drawing, a wry, street-wise cartoon-strip account of her own move from Lima to New York just two days before the destruction of the World Trade Center. Another wall drawing, this one by the Bronx-

based artist Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, rips into the very idea of ethnic identity, specifically the "Latina" identity that women like herself are pressured to adhere to.

Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz has more work on the same theme in "AIM 25" at the Bronx Museum. No art institution in the city has been more diversity-conscious than this one. And its Artist in the Marketplace program, a 12-week residency that focuses on the mechanics of career development and culminates in an exhibition, reflects this. While all of this year's 35 participants live in the United States, many were born elsewhere, including Brazil, Germany, India, Israel, Japan, Libya, Mexico, the Philippines and Croatia (the intriguing photographer Vlatka Horvat).

Comparisons between the two exhibitions are interesting. There is even less overt political work in the Bronx show than at El Museo. A text-based installation by Yucef Merhi and a group of drawings by Fawad Khan that includes a striking but enigmatic image of a blank-faced soldier, are pretty much it. At the same time, the shows have many points of formal overlap.

An assemblage sculpture by Brian Caverly, a cut-paper relief by Beth Gilfilen and a neon sculpture by Esperanza Mayobre, all at the Bronx Museum, have counterparts by José Enrique Krapp, Nicola López and Iliana Emilia Garcia at El Museo. All this work, in turn, finds ready correlatives in Chelsea galleries, raising the question of whether smaller museums are serving as alternatives to, or mirrors of, the mainstream. This is not to say that the Bronx show - organized by Lydia Yee, the museum's senior curator, and Amy Rosenblum Martin, assistant curator - is without distinctive entries. It has its share, in Ben Colebrook's painted sculptural re-creation of the self-help section of a Barnes & Noble bookstore; in Ernest Concepcion's absurdist mural drawing of universal war; in an installation by Olen Hsu that includes a full-scale paper piano.

And there are two noteworthy videos. One, by Ivan Monforte, shot with a digital camera, shifts lingeringly from house cats playing, to hip-hop dancers dancing, to shots of moths attracted to light. With its grainy color and spacey metabolism, it is strange and beautiful. Mr. Montforte is worth keeping an eye on.

So, maybe, is Steven Lam. His "Desperate Attempts in Making Something Out of Nothing: Toward an Illegitimate Practice" borrows from the wackiness of very early video art and adds slacker wackiness of its own. Unstylish style is part of the point. The only identity under scrutiny is Mr. Lam's as geek-anarchist artist. And the big idea, as suggested by the title, takes the form of another question, one that a lot of people have been asking in these postidentity, postpolitical days: beyond the flim-flam of passing trends, where does art go from here?