



Artists unite in project about racial divisions

Thursday, April 10, 2003

By Terry Young

Four conceptually multifaceted works divide Artist Image Resource's 518 Foreland Street exhibition space on the North Side.

At first glance one would not be inclined to think beyond the usual grouping of images, videos and photographs sharing the space. But with patient investigation, the viewer discovers that the seven exhibiting artists worked with more than 30 individuals representing some 10 community organizations, ranging from high schools to stress-management groups.

The seeds of this complex undertaking were sewn in September with The Andy Warhol Museum's presentation of "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America." The exhibit showcased imagery of racial atrocity at its worst, and catalyzed museumwide programs, discussions and community outreach.

As artist/educators at The Warhol, Tresa Varner, Maritza Mosquera, Carrie Schneider and Sarah Williams spearheaded the question of race. "Without Sanctuary: Artists' Projects" opens a window into their ongoing projects.

In "Striking Images," Schneider sets the tone of the exhibit and the role of the artist/educator: "Through my experience in working with the 'Without Sanctuary' project, for which I led dozens of dialogues around issues of race and history, I began to realize the power of civic dialogue. By allowing others the time to tell their stories, by discussing disagreements in a respectful manner, by designating a safe space to talk about important issues, much can be accomplished in terms of understanding our history, each other and ourselves."

Schneider worked with East Liberty-based "Grandparents as Parents," grandmothers who meet to discuss the challenge incurred by being placed in the role of parent to their grandchildren.

Rather than focus on the issue at hand, Schneider's interests lie in how the women represent themselves as people. "Striking Images" documents through photography the personal family photos of the women as daughters, wives and friends. Schneider juxtaposes these images with contemporary portraits of the women, complemented by text selected from the group's discussions as each woman shared her pictures and memories.

Mosquera exhibits a multimedia presentation of her "Men's Lives" project. Noting that

"Without Sanctuary" prompted men "to be the most emotionally open to show crying, anger, confusion and trust ... since most of the photographs depicted men as either evil perpetrators or victims," Mosquera aimed to create a forum to channel and assess this emotion between black and white men. "Men's Lives," the culmination of 10 weeks of discourse, presents video and text documentation of the men's interaction, with large-scale silk-screened portraits of each participant. These faces counterbalance with humanity the silence and despair present in the lynching images.

Williams and Jamilla Rice present insight into the cultural power of hair in women of African descent. Gathering testimonials and images from nine local women over five months, Williams and Rice show how "hair is a rich touchstone for the exploration and insight into issues of race, culture, politics, sexuality, economics and aesthetics." The team presents its findings as a series of personal stories; compelling is the "revolutionary aesthetic" of the Afro hairstyle of the '70s. Centering the display is a mock "beauty parlor," complete with relaxers, extensions and a drugstore counter full of hair products.

Varner's "Scripts for Behavior" was done in collaboration with Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts students Adam Carnes and Diana Ngo. Meeting with 10 local high school students, the collaborators discussed issues affecting teens today: violence, sexuality, media and the effects race and ethnicity have on these topics. Varner's digital prints depict eight scenarios played out by toys. The scenarios range from date rape to police violence, made more palatable in their comic-like portrayal.

Carnes, 17, and Ngo, 18, acting as discussion mediators, say the project was a learning experience in respecting opinions and differentiating positive discussion from argument, thus reaffirming the benefits of civic dialogue.

"Artists' Projects" continues through April 30. A closing reception will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. April 24. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays. For information, call 412-321-8664.

Terry Young is a freelance writer.

[Back](#)

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