

ART REVIEW; *From Small Sculptures to Glimpses of Signs, a Mix of Works in the Bronx*



By Ken Johnson

Aug. 15, 2003

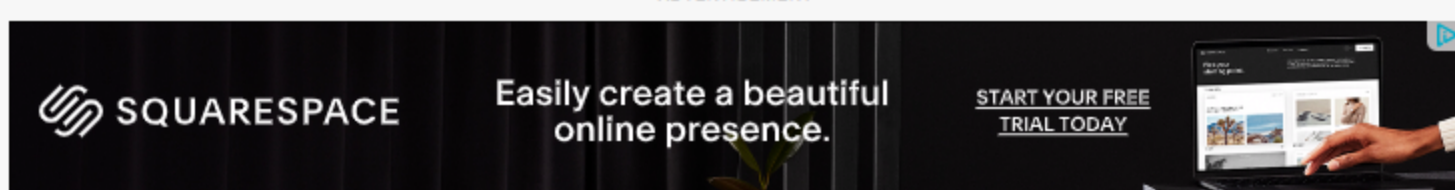
No one ever said it would be easy to achieve a self-sustaining art career in New York. Even artists who have lived in the city for years remain mystified by the commercial system's apparent impenetrability. Yet there are lots of artists who do manage it. How do they do it?

One answer is: Make great art and they will come. Summoned by the vibes of your art, the dealers, curators and collectors will magically appear at your studio door. The other answer is: It's a business, so deal with it. Make art good, bad or indifferent and then learn how to sell it -- and yourself. This is the approach favored by Artists in the Marketplace (A.I.M.), an artist-supporting program, now in its 23rd year, that focuses not on helping artists make better art but on helping them learn effective ways of marketing their work.

Over the course of two 12-week series of seminars, young and emerging artists are introduced to commercial gallery dealers, and to other successful artists, critics, curators, arts administrators, foundation representatives, publicists and even lawyers, who teach them about grant writing, contract negotiations, curatorial practices, pricing, portfolio presentation and so on. At the end of the year, the 35 participants are given a big group show, and this year's edition is on view now at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Although it resembles one, the A.I.M. show is not a student exhibition. The artists are out of school and have embarked on their various professional journeys. But it is not the Whitney Biennial; it is not about fresh new things currently animating the art world. A few of these artists might eventually make themselves known in contemporary art, but if the next Matthew Barney or Lisa Yuskavage is among them, there is no evidence of it yet.

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Most of the artists are doing the kinds of work that graduate students all over the nation are producing: slightly oversize, conceptually portentous color photographs laminated to panels; layered pastiches of appropriated cartoon imagery; oblique, politically tendentious videos; neat constructions mixing Minimalism and references to vernacular culture.

Most of the work in the show is well executed, but most of it is also so obviously derivative that it could revive a belief in originality in even the most hidebound neo-Marxist. But there is only one painting in the entire show -- Antonio Vigil's expansive cityscape painted with a sensuously meticulous touch -- which seems odd, considering what an active presence painting has had in New York galleries over the last couple of years.

At the risk of sounding too harsh, it's hard to escape the feeling that what is most urgently needed here is not career coaching but some constructive critical input. Does this cast doubt on the A.I.M. program? Maybe, maybe not. This is not the place to judge its effectiveness at producing smarter career managers.

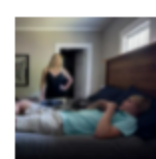
In any case, on a positive note, there are some appealing artworks in the show. Jeongtae Chae, for one, produces economical sculptural works out of ordinary found materials that are remarkable for their optical effects. A radiating ring of white plastic forks on the floor, called "Flower," for example, creates a pulsating composition of concentric patterns. And a grid of short cardboard tubes, each holding within it a plastic pipe section in red, black or white is similarly captivating.

Also absorbing to look at are Joe Fig's small sculptures of artists' painting tables, crowded with tubes, cans, bottles and brushes. These doll-house-scale works, which include lots of paint splattering and detritus, are not just feats of miniaturism. They represent the work tables of specific artists, including those of April Gornick and Gary Stephan. So they are, in a sense, indirect portraits, as well as sociological documents of a certain vein of professional art-making.

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The most enjoyable video is Kate Gilmore's, in which she appears to be trying to bring order to extremely messy situations. Dressed sensibly in black like an office temp worker, she stacks papers, envelopes and other clerical detritus into shaky towers that keep falling over. It's mildly funny, but the artist's earnest persistence is oddly moving as well.

Each artist has provided a brief statement about his or her work. Some are more helpful than others. One of the best is by Hidemi Sato, who writes: "When I was a little girl in Japan, I saw the movie 'American Graffiti' on TV. I was amazed by the color in the film. Everybody was dressed in bright clothes: all of the cars and furniture were extremely colorful. I felt it was very American and it filled me with happy feelings."

This is how Ms. Sato explains her practice of what she calls "Happie Photographie," which consists of expansive, gridded arrangements of fragmentary glimpses of fast food restaurant signs, gas station signs and billboards, all seen against backgrounds of deep blue sky. For all its beautiful superficiality, there's a mysterious, poetic profundity to this work.

"A.I.M. 23" is at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, Morrisania, (718) 681-6000, through Sept. 28.

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