

Review/Art; When the Medium Doesn't Agree With the Message

By Roberta Smith

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The "Art in the Anchorage" exhibition, now in its ninth summer, has lately tended to operate firmly in the gap between art and politics, and its 1992 incarnation is no exception. The endangered environment, homelessness, nuclear weapons and women's rights are among the prominent themes in this year's exhibition, which as usual is in the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage and has been organized by Creative Time, a nonprofit arts group in Manhattan.

To their credit, the five artists and the members of one collaborative group in the show - all of them women -- have taken full advantage of the implicit theatricality of the anchorage's cavernous brick vaults, which are in many ways the closest thing in New York City to ancient Rome. (With their high-domed ceilings and musty, subterranean darkness, these enormous spaces seem part Baths of Caracalla, part catacombs.)

In fact, moving through this exhibition of large installation pieces is like touring a series of carefully orchestrated stage sets. With its white pillowcases strung floor to ceiling, Helene Aylon's "Earth Ambulance, 1982-92" seems upon first encounter like a courtyard of a Neapolitan tenement, or perhaps the setting for a modern-day comic opera. Mildred Howard's display of row upon row of pairs of human feet cast in wax makes one think of a mosque or church full of pilgrims about to kneel. And Liz Young's "Dignity of Survival," full of sculptural objects and arrangements that suggest implements of torture, brings out the anchorage's dungeon potential.

What's interesting about the show is the extent to which the often dramatic first impression of each work relates, or doesn't, to its subject, which is gleaned as much from titles and text panels as from the art itself. Each piece has a different degree of overlap or discrepancy between what might be called medium and message. As a result, the exhibition is most effective when taken as a kind of debate between artworks about the relationship of form and meaning, especially political meaning, in art.

Ms. Howard's presentation of cast wax feet has an undeniable beauty, but also an all-purpose somberness that accommodates several possible readings. The life-size feet, lined up in rows on a field of gravel and illuminated with a low, raking light, suggest ghosts visible only from the ankles down, a truncated army of the dead. It takes a look at the work's title, "Walk Together Children, Don't You Be Weary . . ." as well as an explanatory caption, to realize that the subject of the piece is the 30 million homeless children in Brazil. It's a noble topic, but not necessarily elucidated by the art before us, especially since the feet, which are all identical, aren't even child size.

Form and meaning, or at least seeing and reading, are more in agreement in "New World (B)Order," a installation by a Japanese artist, Seiko Mikami, that makes its portion of the anchorage resemble a well-equipped hardware store, or a bomb shelter. The work's readability is built in: Every object in this elaborate Neo-Conceptual piece is labeled. Similarly, Ms. Mikami's "meaning" is information itself, information about the various environmental hazards -- from air and water pollution to nuclear and biological wastes -- that are part of late 20th-century life.

In 10 large (8-by-4-foot), hygienically clear plastic bags, the artist presents multiple accumulations of the stopgap measures by which humans devise to clean up after themselves. One bag contains 6 radioactive-waste boxes, another has 2 blue "noxious liquid spills kits," a third holds 26 bright red bottles labeled "test animal waste," and so forth. The grim message, combined with the bright accumulations of objects (bringing to mind Andy Warhol or Arman) works, up to a point. But the piece is also extremely didactic and excessively complicated, which means that it tends to cancel itself out, leaving the viewer longing for some of the poetic vagueness of the wax feet next door.

Ms. Young's "Dignity of Survival," a slightly melodramatic presentation that is as homespun and antiquated in appearance as "New World (B)Order" is high tech, seems upon first glance to be similarly efficient in terms of form and meaning. Starting out with a crude wood chair, and including a houselike gallows, the artist conjures a series of humiliations and tortures, using items like corsets to pinpoint women as the victims. But at a certain point the piece starts coming apart as one realizes that Ms. Young's best forms are extremely ambiguous -- a thick wax basin with an enormous copper drain, for example -- and acquire political meaning by association with the artist's more obvious props.

Visually, Ms. Aylon's "Earth Ambulance," with its hanging linen and real ambulance full of grain, is the most engaging piece in the exhibition. But again, it's entirely possible to enjoy it for the wrong reasons. The work is a 10-year extended performance piece that involved "rescuing" pillowcases of dirt from each Strategic Air Command site around the country, an exchange of dirt with Russian women, the writing of statements and poems on many of the pillowcases by different people encountered along the way, and a vigil at the United Nations; it is worthy of a documentary film, probably an overly earnest one.

The installation, which hardly does the saga justice, works primarily as a series of excessive accumulations -- piles of dirt, rows of pillowcases, grain spilling out of the ambulance -- whose sensuousness belies Ms. Aylon's career in the early 1970's as a Process painter. There's a slightly absurdist, celebratory air to it all, and it's hard to imagine it looking as good anyplace else.

Gretchen Bender's installation, "Untitled From the 'Entertainment Cocoon' Series," neatly avoids explicit political meaning while conjuring a certain unavoidable sense of social malaise. Her swirling image, enormous in scale and created by computer, resembles a cross between the television set from hell and an abstract painting. The image also suggests movements of water and fire, as well as sound, specifically a scream of pain. (It's dedicated to the memory of Seth Rosen, a friend of the artist's who died

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recently.) In addition, it's so implicitly tacky that it would not seem out of place in a shopping mall.

In a sense, "Art in the Anchorage" receives its sternest criticism from its sixth inclusion, a labyrinthine installation devoted to women's rights that is the work of the Women's Action Coalition, best known as WAC. A combination of fun house, bulletin board and multi-chambered political booth, this work barrages the viewer with information about child abuse, sex discrimination, racial prejudice, abortion, plastic surgery, women's medicine and a host of other issues. With an intensity that has little to do with art and everything to do with real life, it is essentially an extended call to consciousness and action, one suggesting that political art, at least as seen here, may not be so effective as activism in the political arena.

"Art in the Anchorage" remains at the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage, Cad man Plaza West and Old Front Street, at the base of the bridge in Brooklyn, through Sept. 20.