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by Corina Zappia

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Market Share

Statements and Strategies: Young Artists Negotiate Their Entry Into the Gallery Scene

by Karen Rosenberg
August 22nd, 2003 7:00 PM

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Imaginary friend: a frame from Jillian McDonald's *Me and Billy Bob*
Photograph by Robin Holland

When Andy Warhol philosophized that "good business is the best art," it was a bit shocking to an art world trained on myths of Abstract Expressionist bohemia. While his provocation has long since lost its edge, basic survival skills like writing grant applications and negotiating contracts are still too prosaic for most art-school curricula. The Bronx Museum's "Artists in the Marketplace" (AIM) program tries to bridge the gap, offering emerging artists in the New York area a valuable crash course in career-management (see **sidebar**) that culminates in an annual exhibition. "AIM 23" is neither a trade fair nor a biennial; in fact, it's more like an ambitious M.F.A. thesis show, minus some of the usual solipsism.

While AIM isn't a topical survey by nature, it's a good litmus test for art-world trends. This year's artists, especially those with international backgrounds, seem preoccupied with the same themes that are currently on display in the Whitney's "American Effect." They've certainly done their market research. Consider Clarence Lin's artist statement: "The United States is living through one of the darkest periods of its history. . . . Homeland security has minimized critical spaces for opposition, curtailed civil liberties, and censored dissenting voices from corporate media. Now more than ever, North Americans need public forums where we can openly discuss difficult topics like politics and race." True enough, but the macabre work that follows—airplane blueprints and cockpit transcripts related to the September 11 hijackings—isn't exactly galvanizing.

Other would-be activists at least manage to convey a sense of humor. Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga's NexumATM, which his website describes as "The automated teller that reflects a history of imperialism by the United States," prompts the viewer to select from a list of foreign currencies—the Iraqi dinar, say. Once the choice has been made, a tiny digital wrestler leaps about on the screen in an interpretive re-enactment of American aggression in that region. Rutherford Chang, in his video Dead Air (State of the Union), edits footage of last January's controversial speech so that the President's mouth flaps silently between moments of applause. In the same spirit, Trong G. Nguyen offers fortune cookies filled with Bush malapropisms, or "Bushisms"—a decidedly low-calorie treat.

Debunking the American Dream proves an equally popular pursuit. Traci Talasco constructs a crude model of a suburban housing lot; Hidemi Sato photographs details of fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and amusement parks with a magpie sensibility; and Diane Meyer layers campy cartoon cowboys over Western-style landscape paintings bought from thrift shops. In general, the AIM students might want to spend less time in American Studies and more revising their artist statements, which are at best full of vagaries and at worst completely incoherent. In

a typical example, Bibi Calderaro writes of the toylike acrylic shapes in her installation: "these faith-ile [sic] structures are at once present and empty. they may be flowers, they may be gardens in which to question reality at leisure. they may be soul shields or vitamin compounds—like heroes." Fortunately, only a few works are able to match this level of inanity. Christian Tomaszewski's installation The Theater and Its Double opens, portentously, with a beaded curtain and fake wood paneling; inside is a multi-channel video having something to do with the mythical Hydra. Lynda Abraham's Toxic Drink is a Foucauldian "correctional device" intended for executives of companies that pollute the environment, enabling them to sip from their own urine.

The best work validates a simple adage: Believe in yourself, and the market will follow. Such leaps of faith can be witnessed in Joe Fig's exquisite little dioramas of famous painters' studios, and in a grainy black-and-white video of simple, enthralling rituals performed with Naumanesque gravity by Alison Crocetta. The ultimate labor of love, however, is Jillian McDonald's video and Web project Me and Billy Bob. A cross between a fan site and a romantic-comedy flashback sequence, this hilarious work should at the very least earn McDonald a restraining order. The artist has digitally inserted herself into clips from Billy Bob Thornton films such as Monster's Ball and The Man Who Wasn't There; standing in for the female lead, she gazes at her partner in mawkish adoration to the seductive strains of his recording of "Starlight Lounge." Perhaps this is the place to mention that I happened to be looking at the video on Thursday, August 14, at around 4:10 pm. The song cut off in mid-phrase, the monitor flickered into darkness, and the emergency backup system cast a soft, church-like glow over the galleries. Suddenly, Thornton's famed magnetism made more sense to me.

So, for that matter, did Rossana Martínez's sculpture The City Rises, a colorful micro-metropolis of stacked paper, Styrofoam, and plastic desk accessories rising from a grid of drafting tape on plywood. Martínez describes her constructed city as "a place where harmony and chaos, order and disorder, ease and difficulty, humane and inhumane coexist." In the initial moments of the power failure, as traffic on the Grand Concourse evolved from cacophonous anarchy to an acquiescent crawl, hers was a work of art that had found its market.

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