

GALLERY

Worthy  
Winners

By Alice Thorson

"Awards in the Visual Arts 10"  
At the Hirshhorn Museum and  
Sculpture Garden to Sept. 2

There is much to recommend this year's Awards in the Visual Arts (AVA) exhibit, the 10th AVA show in as many years. By design—annually, a national jury reviews nominations submitted by arts professionals from around the country and then chooses one winner from each of 10 geographical areas—the endeavor is regionally balanced as opposed to being a forum for New York-LA chic, and this year's show similarly highlights a wide range of trends and media. AVA 10's paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, neo-conceptual works, and various combinations thereof admit a diversity of perspectives as well: Two of the artists are homosexual; four are women; one is African-American; two were born in Cuba and one in Puerto Rico. Given the history of marginalization of these groups by both the art world and society, it is not surprising that much of the work on view bespeaks a highly critical view of life and attitudes in the U.S. today.

This fact is especially noteworthy given the government and right-wing harassment AVA suffered over its support for Andres Serrano's work two years back. But, as Chicago-based catalog essayist Katherine Hixon notes, this year's jury panel and AVA "were not intimidated by attempts to limit the freedom of speech," and, rather, "seemed determined to include...work that openly and responsibly addressed issues of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference." With these concerns as its foundation, AVA 10 is a brooding, edgy show that flies in the face of recent Gulf War bravado and hammers away at the domestic ills and fears that the current administration has chosen to ignore or exacerbate. If there is a dominant evil addressed by this show, it is the pervasiveness of intolerance. In his or her own way, each of these artists plumbs and pummels an American psyche blinded by mythology and self-deception.

Though a commitment to issues forms the soul of this exhibit, this strength does not come at the expense of the works' visual power—rarely is content allowed to override form. The painting selections in this show—by Puerto Rican-born Arnaldo Roche-Rabell and Cuban-born Carlos Alfonso—are truly magnificent, and, not incidentally, attest to the vital contribution made by Latin American artists to a genre sorely in need of a shot in the arm.

In all three of Roche-Rabell's large canvases, images redolent of his native Puerto Rico emerge from a turgid, flickering welter of strokes that look as if painted with fire. Intensifying these pictures of psychic hell, a jungle of seemingly acid-bleached tropical vegetation weaves through and around the central images of a mask, a crucifixion, and the artist himself in feathered headdress. The anguish and expectation Roche-Rabell con-



Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's *For the Record: The Eleventh Commandment* (1990).

veys is almost overwhelming, and in his ability to visualize such depth of feeling he has few rivals in contemporary art.

Carlos Alfonso's somber canvases express not the fight, but a metaphysical coming to terms with the inevitabilities of human existence. Two of his three large canvases are dominated by a totemic, head-shaped form wrested in luminous outline from the surrounding darkness. Personal eschatological essays by a man who himself died of complications arising from AIDS just last February, these are profoundly spiritual paintings, representing a search for the essence in a relativist, temporal world.

Counterpointing this strong showing of Latin American expressionism, Cuban-born Tony Labat's installation of padded crates and video broaching the issue of institutional surveillance takes a coolly distanced view of an explosive topic. Fortunately for the artist, but sadly for the rest of us, the piece gains enhanced relevance as current events unfold.

Adrian Piper has for some time been a controversial artist—in 1989 she composed *What will Become of Me*, comprising an offer to donate her cremated ashes to the Museum of Modern Art—but she is best known for her unflagging and often discomfiting battle against racism. Piper's work confronts intolerance, not as a superficial nor easily excised thing, but as a deep-rooted and elusive social cancer. Her *Safe*, comprising group photographs of Africans and African-Americans printed with statements such as "We are among you," "We are within you," "You are safe," accompanied by an audiotaped monologue featuring the artist in apologetic "white voice," typifies her strategy of excavation and confrontation. The crux of this work is its exposure of the discrepancy between the ideals Americans mouth and the behavior and attitudes they sustain. Piper continues African-

American art's long commitment of addressing social issues. Within that tradition she has set herself the task of breaking down the barriers of otherness.

Over the years, New Mexico-based sculptor Steve Barry has tackled a variety of themes in his characteristically viewer-interactive works. Considering AVA's determination not to dodge the politically dicey, it was perhaps not unintentional that the Barry piece selected for the show broaches the idea of Manifest Destiny, a subject that seemingly won't go away—from Washington, at least—as the country approaches the Quincentennial of Columbus. Barry's treatment of this theme takes the form of a skeletal horse which the viewer mounts and activates by pulling the reins. This done, the beast's head slowly raises to the strains of Western music, and the image of a human skeleton appears on a screen before the rider. At the horse's rump and facing the skeleton image glows an illuminated mural-scaled, picture-postcard view of a Western landscape.

Barry's work typifies the best of so-called "regional art" in addressing issues germane but not confined to his immediate environment. Insofar as it was executed by a Western artist, this piece is particularly satisfying against the backdrop of Alaska Republican Senator Ted Stevens' recent charge that the National Museum of American Art's "West as America" exhibit (which is also heavily invested in exploring the Manifest Destiny theme) is primarily a manifestation of East Coast elitism toward the West.

Though nearly all of the works on view exert a strong material presence, the very different sculptures of Petah Coyne and Jessica Stockholder elicit the most visceral response. Coyne's fibrous, felt pod and vessel shapes are both womblike and excremental and at times suggestive of figures. Sus-

pended from the ceiling, their clotted masses strain toward earth, caught at the verge of lapsing into primal chaos. In contrast, Stockholder's awkward bundles and arrangements of seamy, disparate castoffs take the trappings of civilization as their starting point. Though the work is composed with a deliberate eye to formal relationships, its shoddiness must frustrate all but the most die-hard connoisseur, leaving most museum-goers to dwell on the artist's references to environmental suffocation and an existence overrun with garbage. Truly, she seems to insist, today's cultural artifacts are tomorrow's junk.

The installation by Cary S. Leibowitz, aka "CandyAss," also derives particular piquance from its institutional setting. Inclusive of a variety

of kitsch, childishly scrawled placards, hand-decorated plates, and pennants with epigraphs like "Drop dead" and "Life sucks," the piece is in essence a room-sized manifesto of homosexual disaffection and artistic insecurity. Like so much of the work in this show, Leibowitz's approach falls within a pre-established tradition; in this case, the unabashedly personalized feminist-installation work of the 1970s pioneered by artists such as Ree Morton. Central to this work's rebellion against conventional notions of beauty and artistic appropriateness is the idea that the rules of art are part and parcel of a larger discriminatory system, in which privileging of certain ideas and perspectives is paralleled by the art world's privileging of certain modes of expression.

A concern with language, for both its mutability and the prejudices it embeds, is part of the bedrock of postmodernism. Typifying the conceptualist revival fueled by these concerns, the word paintings of Kay Rosen are as intellectually witty as they are visually negligible. Similarly pristine in appearance is the grid of small, bright-hued, monochromatic canvases installed by James Hayward. Mere eye-candy on the surface, the work's ostensibly perceptual orientation exists in tension with the dangers posed by the materials employed: Each of these pigments has been found potentially toxic and will be banned by the U.S. Senate.

Among AVA 10's many strengths is its irrefutable demonstration that an exhibit celebrating cultural and ethnic diversity need not sacrifice quality. Rather, the high order of seriousness and cultural commitment that prevails throughout offers a most welcome reprieve from the irony that dominated the art of the last decade. If the realities these artists point up are far from heartening, it is more disturbing when truth, however unpleasant, is ignored or papered over. CP