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By Catherine Foz

High Museum exhibit falters Works on Civil Rights era mute dialogue

Radical change does not come without a fight. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1968 took place in the midst of demonstrations, assassinations and riots. The artwork in the High Museum's "After 1968: Contemporary Artists and The Civil Rights Legacy," by contrast, is as cool as the civil rights era was hot.

The young artists curator Jeffrey Grove assembled don't look back in anger, nor do they fulminate about the problems of the present. Their approach is cerebral, skeptical and oblique.

Maybe too cerebral and too oblique. Some of the projects are memorable and provocative, but more often ideas get lost in translation to visual form. And rarely do the works engage each other in a mutually illuminating conversation.

Instead, walking through the galleries is like overhearing the tail-end of a series of monologues. You sense something interesting is going on, but ultimately you're baffled.

Though Adam Pendleton's "Black Dada" paintings are striking, it would take ESP and an M.A. in art history to divine that he's supplying the link between radical politics and radical art missing in official histories.

At least, the paintings offer the pleasure of their minimalist sleekness and clever use of typography. Visual acuity is absent altogether from Otabenga Jones & Associates' activity book. How could anyone with serious intentions to teach children about the civil rights era, artists especially, use such awful coloring book-style line drawings? Few kids raised on media spectacle would even bother to look at these pages.

Visually and conceptually, the project appears slapdash, geared more to promoting the group's cleverness than (to quote their statement) "serving the underserved."

The best pieces are those least beholden to text, theory and art-world hipness. Among them, **Jefferson Pinder's** haunting video "White Noise" is resonant visually and metaphorically. So is "Coronation Theme: Organon," Nadine Robinson's imposing architectural assemblage of black speakers.

Artfully constructed of different sizes and shapes to suggest an altarpiece or church facade, "Coronation" emits an array of sounds both mournful and triumphant — glorious church music, sounds of rushing water and reverb in a stately rhythm.

Curator Grove has described the piece as a contemporary memorial, an idea he cleverly accentuates by its placement at the show's entrance, across from photos of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral in the companion exhibit, "Road to Freedom."

"Coronation" also embodies the legacy of the 1960s art movements — minimalism and conceptual art — to which Pendleton refers in his paintings.

Their shared artistic language and use of black to represent both absence and presence, among other similarities, make them striking bookends for the show, which would have benefited from more of the kind of connections Grove forged here.