

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

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By Kurt Shaw

Black-and-white issues

If there is one art exhibition to catch now before it's too late, it's the "11th Annual Projects Exhibition," which is at Artists Image Resource through Jan. 13.

As in previous years, AIR, as this North Side fine-art printmaking facility is called, has mounted a year-end review of new print-related projects completed by visiting artists over the past year. And this one, like most, has a range of works, from a suite of original prints to a larger installation that incorporates print-related elements.

It is that larger installation that really is a must-see. Titled "Juke," it is by Baltimore-based video and performance artist Jefferson Pinder. It is so important to see because it not only registers as a solid contribution to the contemporary art canon, but it also has the ability to reopen the dialogue about race, confronting presumptions about identity and culture in our time.

In a way, it's much like British artist Phil Collins' video karaoke piece, "the world won't listen," part of which was on display in the summer in Carnegie Museum of Art's Forum Gallery. Collins' completed three-part video project, filmed in Colombia, Turkey and Indonesia, features fans of the influential British indie-rock band The Smiths singing karaoke tracks from their 1987 hit album "The World Won't Listen." It, too, is about culture and identity.

But here, Pinder makes Collins' piece look like a simple homemade karaoke video, or at least a sketch for a much grander concept. For starters, Pinder chose 10 African Americans to lip-synch to pop songs in front of his camera. Dressing each in all white and placing them against a white background, they look antiseptic, nearly emotionless (save for one tear) as they appear to sing along to songs by white artists, such as Ben Folds Five, Johnny Cash, Queen and Radiohead.

As eloquently as possible, Pinder utilizes music as a vehicle to wrestle with identity. These are not rap songs they are lip-synching to, after all. So, what are we to make of this social experiment, in which the underlying challenge is to see beyond black and white?

As Pinder writes in his statement: "There are hundreds (if not thousands) of unspoken rules of engagement in this never-ending fight of racism in the United States. Popular music has been a dynamic, changing battleground. Music has always been segregated. Juke is a musical installation that wrestles with serious issues in the most unfamiliar way. Can music be either black or white? Can song be used as an instrument to provoke a conversation about race?"

Other works by Pinder on display -- such as the large-scale digital prints that are documentary of his performance piece "Mule," in which we see the artist himself pulling a 300-pound log encrusted with pressed tin as a metaphor for struggle -- also bring up similar issues of race, but none so profoundly.

The remaining works, by two Pittsburgh artists, also are well worth the visitor's time and attention.

Having worked as a tattoo artist since 1972, Nick Bubash also is an accomplished fine artist whose carefully crafted drawings, prints, mixed-media assemblages and sculptures have gained much attention over the years. Nearly all have been influenced by his interest in superstitious and religious beliefs.

He has traveled extensively in India, studying art and ancient sculpture, which is worth noting when viewing his colorful prints. They are an amalgam of imagery relating to human and animal figures, mechanical elements and pop-culture iconography.

Graphic and candy colored, as one would expect from a tattoo artist, the works are enticing enough. But it is precisely his background as a tattoo artist that has enhanced his compositional sensibilities, allowing for an energetic, almost animated feel to his prints on display, in which he juxtaposes and assembles complex imagery with ease.

For example, Bubash's "Books," volumes 1 and 1 1/2, which represent two hand-painted books the artist created over the past two years, are displayed here in various ways, including as one continuous inkjet print. Altogether, they are an accomplished collection of 50 mixed-media illustrations combining the exotic and mundane to make elaborate compositions that, when viewed side-by-side two pages at a time, create amazing diptychs.

Other, larger four-color screen-print works -- such as "Portrait of Cathy," which features the artist's wife -- are more personal explorations, but just as compelling.

Lastly, a suite of prints by Nathan Mould fills the hallway gallery. Mould's work is heavily influenced by the printmaking process, but also finds its voice through painted marks, constructed objects, sequences and environments.

Taking images of familiar, everyday objects, he reconfigures them as image elements that he subsequently uses as a kind of flexible vocabulary in the construction of work.

Objects are scanned into the computer, manipulated, printed, redrawn, re-marked, cut apart, collaged together and ultimately turned into stencils, screens, plates and other matrices that facilitate subsequent rounds of manipulation, mark making and construction.

Mould's work seems to find strength in the tension between the aggressive (almost involuntary) act of mark making and the more conventional modes of presentation that seem to make the work more accessible to a broader audience.