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RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture @ The National Portrait Gallery

With brightly-colored graffiti murals lining the gallery hallways, and riffs on 17th century Dutch painting, the National Portrait Gallery has brought a breath of fresh air to the often traditional Smithsonian Institution. Last Friday, just weeks after hanging the Stephen Colbert portrait, the NPG opened RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture, a show that's bound to appeal to a wide-ranging audience. But RECOGNIZE! isn't only about trying to bring a younger audience to a museum — the works on display are powerful evocations of American culture that have a broad appeal both in terms of message and artistic merit. From subtle black and white hip hop performance shots by David Sheinbaum to an ode by poet Nikki Giovanni illustrated with an installation by Shinique Smith, the exhibit captures and gives insight into a cultural movement that is essential to understanding American culture.

RECOGNIZE! is part of the Portraiture Now series, which focuses on contemporary artists and new ways of making portraits. This exhibit helps illustrate these parameters — Tim Conlon and Dave Hupp are graffiti artists, who write under a pseudonym, or a “tag.” As the wall text explains, a tag is like a self-portrait, and artists perform “without a public audience.” Their portraits may not be traditional, but they're a vibrant statement about contemporary life.

The portraits by Kehinde Wiley all but steal the show — Wiley depicts Ice T as Napoleon in the famous Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres painting of the emperor. Ice T wields a scepter and sits on a robe, but wears a baseball cap in lieu of a crown. There's also a portrait of LL Cool J in which he's sitting in a chair against a patterned backdrop that is characteristic of Wiley's paintings. The portrait is based on the John Singer Sargent portrait of John D. Rockefeller, because LL thinks of himself as a modern-day Rockefeller.

RECOGNIZE! includes work from a variety of different media, which serves as a reminder of how prevalent the movement is in society. Painter and mixed-media artist C. **Jefferson Pinder** has three videos on display, including *Mule*, in which Pinder literally drags the weight of his daily struggles behind him (pictured).

The artists included here each have a different relationship to hip hop. It's not too much of a stretch to say the music, at times, doesn't evoke the most positive images. So imagine you're the parent of a teenager who's enthralled by that culture. What would your reaction be?

For Santa Fe-based photographer David Sheinbaum, the reaction was to become involved with his son's interest. Sheinbaum has gained recognition for his photography of Miami's Jewish community and migrant workers in the Southwest. After chaperoning his son to a Hieroglyphics crew show in Albuquerque, he saw the potential for making hip hop artists a focus. Unlike some other photographers, Sheinbaum didn't want to shoot celebrities. Rather, he wanted to capture the humanity of his subjects.

The bulk of the black and white photos in the collection were taken between 2002 and 2005 in either Albuquerque or Los Angeles. While most focused on individual artists such as Del Tha Funkee Homosapien, Jean Grae and Mos Def, others include concert scenes such as an airborne crowd-surfer at a KRS-ONE show.

Sheinbaum's shots convey hip hop's most basic attribute: the connection between the artist and their audience. The artists' laboring is seen and while no words are expressed, their photographed actions communicate the intent to share a part of their world with onlookers.

Four of the seven artists here have local ties, which is just one more reason why this is a fun show for the NPG — Tim Conlon and Dave Hupp work in Washington and Baltimore, respectively; Jefferson Pinder was educated and teaches at the University of Maryland; and Shanique Smith was born in Baltimore. Poet Nikki Giovanni also teaches close by at Virginia Tech.

RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture is on display through October 26. The National Portrait Gallery is located at 8th and F Streets, NW, and is open from 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

W. Jacarl Melton contributed to this post

Mule

By Jefferson Pinder

8 mm film transferred to digital video, 2006

Jefferson Pinder, courtesy of G Fine Art; © Jefferson Pinder