

February 6, 2008

THE EMPEROR'S PRETENTIOUS NEW CLOTHES

Too many ideas cause Artists Space exhibit to suffer

By Melissa Stern

What do you do when you read the press release for an exhibition, study the catalogue with Talmudic intensity and still can't figure out what the purpose of the show is? Such was the case for me upon seeing *Nina in Position* at Artists Space in Soho. The exhibition seems to embody everything that is pretentious and laughable about the contemporary art scene.

Obtuse and self-serious, the first line of the press release—"Nina in Position presents diverse artistic strategies that complicate the legibility of lack and difference in America"—should have been a tip off. Some of those words just don't make sense together. Perhaps a metaphor for the exhibition?

The show is chock full of "blue-chip" contemporary artists but is weighed down by too many big concepts that just don't make for a coherent exhibition. The juxtaposition of a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of two bare-chested men dancing together with Lisa Tan's silly sculpture of three houseplants ("dimensions variable") is supposed to illustrate "sculpture's mercurial qualities by examining materiality, transience and the process of making." I don't think so.

Individually, there are some interesting sculptures. Michael Queenland's surreal and vaguely sexual mixed-media pieces stand out as genuinely intriguing. An elegant assemblage of materials by Jack Pierson is quite affecting.

Mostly, however, all of this super-trendy contempo art looks ho-hum together. It's like a shopping list of "hot" ideas: You've got your piece about race (Barkey Hendricks), your gay piece (Mapplethorpe) and your transgressive materials piece (Anya Gallaccio's sculpture of blood, glass and rock salt). Nothing looks fresh. In the always-contemporary words of Gertrude Stein: "There is no there, there."

Nina in Position through March 29. Artists Space, 38 Greene St. Fl 3. (at Grand St.), 212-226-3970; Tues., Thurs. & Fri. noon-6; Wed. noon-8; Sat. noon-5, free.
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