

REPORT FROM MILWAUKEE

by Pedro Vélez

Ah, Milwaukee, now there's a town -- with only 600,000 people, it's still the largest city in Wisconsin, a cultural mix of German-Americans, Polish-Americans and African-Americans given a foamy froth by its breweries, notably Schlitz, Pabst and Miller (only the last remains). And like many now-marginal American industrial burghs, cutting-edge cultural production is thriving.

It was in Milwaukee that New York art expatriate David Robbins coined the term "Platformist" in the late '90s to describe artists using social space as their medium. And it was here in 2006 that the Milwaukee International art fair was launched in a former beer hall by a multitasking artist and curators, including Elysia Borowy-Reeder, Nicholas Frank, Scott Reeder, Tyson Reeder and John Riepenhoff.

The city is also a stop on a Midwestern beltway of art schools, boasting the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD), where I was recently invited to give a talk under the kind auspices of educator and sculptor Will Pergl and Inova artist-curator Nicholas Frank. Inova, or the Institute of Visual Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is another of the city's notable outposts of contemporary art. Founded in 1996, its operations are now overseen by Frank and Bruce Knackert, who manage much with almost no budget at their disposal.

Jefferson Pinder "Anthology"

On view at Inova during my visit was a comprehensive survey of performance videos by Washington, D.C., artist Jefferson Pinder. Dubbed "Anthology," the show is a provocative investigation of issues of race and black identity, presented on TV monitors, flat screens and a large video projection elegantly distributed throughout three dark galleries, including Inova's comfortable movie theater.

Pinder uses professional actors for his vignettes, and provides his audience with the thrilling sense of watching a live performance. In the ten-part video installation *Juke* (2006), black performers with stern faces lip-sync tunes originally performed by white musicians, a displacement that forces us to make comparisons about judgment and individuality.

The two-channel projection *Shoeshine Variations* (2007) is an exploration of stigma, manual labor and class warfare. Two generations of African-American shoe shiners, each dressed appropriately for their era, are seen cleaning the dirty shoes of a squalid young white man in a "wife-beater" t-shirt. The older man takes pride in his work, and even dances gracefully as part of the process. His younger counterpart, in distinct contrast, polishes the shoe so hard that it rips apart, and then proceeds to paint the exposed foot in a gooey brown substance.

Dennis Balk at Inova

A second show at Inova fills the gallery's spacious main hall with photos, posters, scientific diagrams, theater props and other artworks by Dennis Balk, the well-traveled playwright and graphic designer. Titled "Dennis Balk: Early Work 1890-2090," the exhibition clearly takes a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the vaunting artistic ego.

The show presents Balk as something of a mad scientist, featuring an assortment of graphic readouts, what looks like a homemade "magnetic receiver," frenetic drawings on napkins and compulsively hand-written historical timelines. It also boasts theatrical props like stage steps and trash cans, plus plenty of photographs, including a large picture of Ho Chi Minh.

On one wall is a grid of 36 framed photos titled *Particles+waves with plausibility* (2003), which intersperses documentary images of men in urban Egypt with colorful close-ups of subatomic particles, coral-like abstractions, computer-generated video game iconography, topology, spices and images of ancient ruins. As outrageous as it may sound, Balk seems to be suggesting an extraterrestrial component in Middle Eastern genetics. In Balk's universe, we are amateur journalists trying to complete his puzzle and he triumphs in creating the sense of logic, if not meaning.

Green Gallery, West and East

One highlight of Milwaukee's commercial gallery scene is the aforementioned John Riepenhoff's Green Gallery West, which is located in a charmingly ugly building that also houses a video arcade, the Club Nuts comedy nightclub, the quarters of the Cultural Crisis Residency Program, and studios for artists, including those of Peter Barrickman and Santiago Cucullu. Recently in town on a residency was London-based painter Antonio Veiga Rocha, who during his stay developed a series of good looking, black-on-black flat latex drip paintings about the black experience in the Midwest.

In place of a backroom, the gallery has something called the John Riepenhoff Experience, which is a miniature room attached to the ceiling and viewable only by climbing a stepladder and sticking your head through a hole. In the end, the view isn't that different from any other white cube. During my visit, the box contained a single photo by Brian Scott Zbichorski, measuring a little more than two inches square. Visible in the tiny picture was an aqua night sky over a strangely Barbizon-like landscape.

But that's not all. Riepenhoff also operates the Green Gallery East, an ostensibly swanker sibling of the western branch located in a former pizza restaurant, with its typical roadside sign painted in monochromatic green. Opened less than a year ago, this enterprise is run with business partner Jake Palmert.

On view were conceptual sculptures and paintings by the trans-regional maverick José Lerma. Born in Spain and raised in Puerto Rico, Lerma started law school in Wisconsin but ended up with a degree in art. He now lives in New York, where he is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery. He also and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

His paintings *Soil Flowers* and *Soil Portrait* are made with earth recovered from Chicago's Grant Park on the exact place where Barack Obama made his acceptance speech when he won the presidency. Painted on cardboard with splotches and drips of mud, Lerma's only vaguely representational images nevertheless allude to Obama's "grassroots" political support.

Also on hand is *Fountain Desk and Curtain*, a sculpture that combines a desk made of a plywood plank with a huge found ceramic fountain and a reflective curtain that hangs like a backdrop -- an interesting parody of the current fashion for modernist design. Somehow, the work channels Philip Guston's sad emotion through Constantin Brancusi's formal sensibility.

Jan Lievens at MAM

No visit to Milwaukee would be complete, of course, without a stop at Santiago Calatrava's dramatic Milwaukee Art Museum on the shores of lovely Lake Michigan. Among the attractions, showed off by MAM media relations guy John Eding, was an exhibition of kinetic art, "Sensory Overload: Light, Motion, Sound, and the Optical in Art Since 1945." Push a button on the side of Pol Bury's phallic *Colonne-Erectile* (1964) and its metal "leaves" move and click. Or enter Stanley Landsman's *Walk-In Infinity Chamber* from 1968 and wander through 6,000 light-bulb stars like an astronaut floating in space.

MAM also does its bit for its local artists with "Remains: Contemporary Artists and the Material Past," a show of sculpture by Beth Lipman, Sarah Lindley and BA Harrington. Lipman's monumental glass sculpture, Still Life with Metal Pitcher, commands attention brilliantly with 400 hand-blown vessels, all based on historic forms from Dutch still lifes.

In the main hall, underneath Calatrava's futuristic shell, was "Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered," the touring exhibition that premiered at the National Gallery of Art and that is currently at the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam (till Aug. 9, 2009).

Born just a year apart, Lievens (1607-1674) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) studied with the same master and collaborated in business; Rembrandt may even have served as model for Lievens. But Lievens was so much in the other artist's shadow that a number of his works were attributed to Rembrandt, as well as to other painters.

This exhibition seeks to correct historical oversight and glorify Lievens career, featuring over 50 paintings, 30 prints and 20 drawings. Is it a success? In truth, Lievens style varies rather too much, and his treatment of the human form is uneven. He is also better with religious subjects and formal portraits than allegories.

Strangely, one of the best pictures in the show seems to echo the show's theme. The Raising of Lazarus (1631) is a dramatically asymmetrical graveside scene set in a satin black night. From the bottom of the picture, a pair of arms eerily extends from a minimalist, just-opened tomb. Jesus stands alone, looking heavenward, while onlookers react with surprise. An image for our time.

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