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The New York Times

May 26, 1996

ART

ART; Tribute to Shows Linked to the Bronx

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE BRONX— THE Bronx Museum of the Arts here celebrates its 25th anniversary by focusing on the careers of four younger institutions. Hence, "Bronx Spaces" is a show of shows -- by the Bronx River Art Center and Gallery, the Longwood Arts Gallery, En Foco and the Lehman College Art Gallery.

Bronx River and Longwood are alternative spaces; En Foco is an agency that organizes photography exhibitions. Lehman is a conventional gallery, which keeps an eye on the spaces and, with its present display of photographs by Lisa Kahane, is commemorating what may have been the most alternative of them all, Fashion Moda.

For the museum, Lehman plays it even handedly, choosing seven artists, some prominent, others on their way. When working together, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres probably did as much as anyone to put the borough on the art map by producing painted life casts of its residents.

Now they are known as separate, if similar sculptors, Mr. Torres leading the way with his full-length portrait of the Puerto Rican singer Ruth Fernandez. She stands in the lobby, a queenly figure in concert, wearing a black gown. Mr. Ahearn comes on later with a pair of juvenile rat catchers, each posed with his bag like a big game hunter.

Contrasting with these vernacular pieces are the sophisticated images of Jorge Tacla. The best is a staggering aerial landscape painted in smog browns and grays on four conjoined canvases, which measure roughly 13 feet by 11 feet. Its subject is the Pentagon but could as easily be a lost city. Like the German painter Anselm Kiefer, Mr. Tacla, who comes from Chile, combines an up-to-date sensibility with the majestic approach of a 19th-century Salon painter.

Also present are the eminent printmaker Robert Blackburn and two younger contenders, Catalina Parra and Carol Sun. Mr. Blackburn is represented by three lithographs and a woodcut spanning the period 1958 to 1988.

Ms. Parra and Ms. Sun contribute socio-political insights, the first by way of works on paper involving geometric shapes and texts, the second with 14 plates in a row. Painted on these are quasi-Heraldic emblems, a padlock, a skate key, cats' eyes, and the installation, which comes with

two chairs, is titled "Archetype and Ritual in the Mundane."

Lehman's piece de resistance, however, is a wall covered with row upon row of colored papers on which is printed "World's First Collaborative Sentence," as engineered by Douglas Davis.

This monster in progress first appeared in Mr. Davis's 1994 show, thus heralding the inception of the gallery's Center for Long Distance Art and Culture and, posted on the Internet, reached 50,000 people in six months. As noted in the accompanying documentation, the sentence, to which anyone can contribute, will continue into infinity, or until "the world has no more to say." (Fat chance.)

The adjoining presentation by En Foco contains an antidote to Utopianism in the form of exhilarating black-and-white photographs taken by Gerald Cyrus, Ricky Flores, Corky Lee, Sophie Rivera and Jonathan Martin Rosen.

All the images focus on the human condition, usually in New York City, but the four-foot-by-four-foot portraits from Ms. Rivera's "Latino Portfolio" dominate the show because of their size, rich texture and the Manet-like directness of the photographer's attack. Ms. Rivera may be primarily concerned with form, but she does not overlook significant details, witness the thick black eyebrows on her one male subject, curling upward like plumes.

Most of Mr. Rosen's prints lack figures but, being urban landscapes, manage to imply them. Some are rendered eerie by the use of infrared film, which makes vegetation look frosted, but the eeriness of the windowless, roofless house covered with creeper is innate.

Longwood's "stand" includes installations that could pass as theater sets, notably Esperanza Cortes's "Wedding Suite," where the bed is a giant box covered with white damask and the curtains are made of fleshy-looking beads and flowers.

Another large work is Michael Bramwell's "Signs and Wonders," which features walls hung with bold abstractions drawn in black and red chalk and stretches of plum-colored velvet interspersed with lengths of wood molding. Also on view is a typical work from Tim Rollins and his Kids of Survival collective. It is a 14-foot-long canvas primed with a collage of pages from Kafka's "Amerika," on which are painted images resembling brass musical instruments. More modest and perhaps more memorable is Kukuli Verlade's clay mermaid without arms -- before her water tank is broken and after.

Last but not least is the Bronx River contingent. Juan Sanchez contributes a wall full of images that fairly pulsates with indignation. Noteworthy are two large paintings of the Puerto Rican flag, not in red, white and blue, but joined with a Francisco Oller painting of a peasant, reproduced in dots and hung upside down.

For surcease from Mr. Sanchez's rage, viewers are directed to Lloyd McNeill's richly colored figure paintings, which are African in theme and Picasso-African in style, and Stefani Mar's "Rain of

Terror" in a room by itself. It is a bunch of open black umbrellas, studded with dolls' eyes and attached to the back of a folding chair.

I left "Bronx Spaces," impressed by its glossiness and curious to know whatever happened to the raggedy alternative space of yore. Raggedness revived, of course, is neo-raggedness but there is nonetheless a whiff of authenticity to Ms. Kahane's installation -- its contents and the way they are pasted to the walls of the Lehman College Art Gallery. Fashion Moda flourished in its South Bronx storefront from 1978 to the early 1990's, achieving among other things a mix of trained artists and graffitists from the street.

Mr. Ahearn, a Cornell graduate, went through its mill; Jean-Michel Basquiat, formerly the graffitist, Samo, did not, but probably fared better by waiting for the Warhol touch.

Ms. Kahane's memoir, which covers only the early years, includes a 1981 black and white of Joe Lewis and William Scott, the two black artists who directed the enterprise, and the 1982 color print of Lady Pink. The graffitist models a T-shirt stocked by the Fashion Moda shop at 7 Documenta in Kassel, Germany. The T-shirt is inscribed with one of Jenny Holzer's forgettable aphorisms, "Abuse of power comes as no surprise." My favorite is the black and white of a derelict room, occupied by figures with sticks for legs, bodies made of garbage-stuffed plastic bags and grotesque heads -- an installation by David Finn.

Stefan Eins, the Austrian-born founder of Fashion Moda, was and probably still is half-artist, half-scientific inventor and all together an idea man. When reviewing the 1980 "Real Estate Show," for which the artists commandeered a derelict building, Lucy Lippard acknowledged Mr. Eins as a pioneer in the field of hit-and-run creativity. She also quotes him noting that the middle class is "structured to take care of its art" and wondering if the subculture he encourages would be able to do the same.

"Bronx Spaces" remains on view through June 23. The number to call for information is (718) 681-6000, extension 29. The Lehman show closes May 30. The number there is (718) 960-8732.

Photo: "Fashion Moda" by Lisa Kahane, above; "Blazing" by Jonathan Rosen, left; "Siren 1" by Kukuli Verlade.
