The New York Times

Art Show Captures the Wrenching Effects of Closing a School

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By JON HURDLE AUG. 28, 2015

The show “reForm” commemorates the Fairhill School in North Philadelphia and represents the pain of losing 31 schools. Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA — A school may be made of bricks and mortar, but when one closes, the loss can feel like a death in the family.

So, when Philadelphia started to close 31 public schools three years ago, there was an outpouring of protests, grief and tears — emotions captured in

“reForm,” a show that opened on Friday and focuses on one shuttered school and its neighborhood.

The exhibition, in a converted basement space at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art in North Philadelphia, is a model of a classroom at Fairhill, a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school a mile away that closed at the end of the academic year in 2013.

The space is filled with familiar equipment like lockers, books and desks — 80 percent of which comes from the school itself — but also includes written and oral testimony about the closure and its wrenching effect on students.

Kiara Villegas, 15, a former Fairhill student who participated in the project.Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

In a corridor, a row of cubbies from Fairhill has backpacks, jackets and coat hooks, and a glass case houses a stuffed bobcat, the school’s mascot, standing on a pile of opened books.

Inside the classroom, a blackboard is covered by the text of a letter sent by Dr. William R. Hite, the school district’s superintendent, to Fairhill’s principal, Darlene Lomax, informing her of the decision to close the school.

“Our circumstances require us to reduce the unused space in our schools so that we can better use resources on providing students with a safe environment and

a higher-quality learning environment," says the letter, written on the board in what looks like a chalk script.

The room also contains a teacher's lectern, affixed with part of a "property available" sign. This recalls the actual placard on the shuttered building, with which the school district hopes to attract buyers.

Among the most eloquent components are essays by nine Fairhill students who contributed to the show. They wrote in pencil directly onto the walls of the exhibition that are covered with oversize lined paper to look like exercise books.

Jacob Rodriguez, 17, another Fairhill student. Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

"Whenever I see the school and the ruins, I wanna break into tears," wrote Jacob Rodriguez, 17, who attended Fairhill from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The direct application of pencil to the walls expresses the authenticity of the students' feelings about the closure, said Pepón Osorio, the creator of the exhibition and a professor at Tyler.

"There is a sense of the urgency; there is a sense of allowing them to be able to say what they think is important right there in the moment," Mr. Osorio said. "They had control; I wasn't filtering." (On the wall, Mr. Rodriguez's use of 'wanna' is corrected to 'want to' in red pen by a former English teacher who also

corrected other students' submissions.) In an interview, Mr. Rodriguez recalled his feeling of belonging to the school. "Every time I went there in the morning, it was just a positive atmosphere, even though it was a real bad neighborhood," he said. "People would say good morning to you as soon as you walked through the door. It was a genuinely good place."

Kiara Villegas, 15, wrote on the wall: "They closed our school, for what reason though?"

Ms. Villegas, who attended the school from first to seventh grades, described it as a haven. "It was like a second home to me," she said in an interview. "The teachers were like parents to me." Spoken responses to the closure by Ms. Villegas and 12 other students are recorded in a row of video screens, built into shrinelike structures and supported by giant yellow pencils, standing along one wall of the classroom.

The video statements, which provide a repeating oral backdrop to the show, express a sense of powerlessness against bureaucratic decisions and a fear that the closure would damage their education and increase the danger of falling into a life of crime and incarceration.

Pepón Osorio created the "reForm" exhibition. Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

In an effort to understand how their school was chosen for closure, the participating students made models of the senior officials who were connected

to the decision, including Superintendent Hite; the former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett; and members of the state-appointedSchool Reform Commission who made the final decisions.

“It’s really about understanding not only the implications but also the system itself,” said Mr. Osorio, a prominent installation artist and former social worker. “Very few of them knew there was a School Reform Commission.”

Fernando Gallard, a spokesman for the school district, said, “We completely understand the feelings of the students and their community that something that was part of their community was closed.” He said Fairhill was in a neighborhood where there were two other elementary schools a few blocks apart. Each school was operating at 58 percent to 65 percent of student capacity, but Fairhill was chosen for closure because it was low-performing and was in poor physical condition, he said.

Mr. Gallard said district officials would be willing to meet with any community groups that might form in response to the exhibition, and he said that he personally would visit it.

Mr. Osorio, whose previous work includes the 1994 creation of a crowded inner-city barbershop, said he chose the school over others that were shuttered because it is on his commute to work.

“The ghost of the building, and the presence of that ghost around the neighborhood, and what that meant for the community,” he said, “was overpowering to me.”

“reForm” opened Friday and runs through April 2016, at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art, 2001 North 13th Street in Philadelphia, tyler.temple.edu/reform.

A version of this article appears in print on August 29, 2015, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Art Planted in Fertile Ground, Where Tears Fell for Lost Schools . Order Reprints| Today's Paper|Subscribe

The Atlantic

Urist, Jacoba. "Reimagining Abandoned Schools." *The Atlantic*. December 5, 2015. http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/12/reimagining-abandoned-schools/418311/

Reimagining Abandoned Schools

Can art depicting empty classrooms shape education policy?

Edison High/De Burgos Middle

Matthew Christopher

JACOBA URIST

DEC 2, 2015 | EDUCATION

TEXT SIZE

Schools are more than brick-and-mortar buildings children attend during the day to learn; for many families, they're community centers, too. So when a city closes one, people often experience a particular sense of grief and upheaval, as well as uncertainty about their government's commitment to

equitable education. Over the last decade, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia have shut hundreds of public schools—frequently leaving behind vacant buildings in impoverished neighborhoods and raising questions about lawmakers' motivations. (Last year, four independent education organizations in Louisiana, Illinois, and New Jersey filed a Title VI complaint asking the U.S. Justice and Education departments to investigate racist or otherwise discriminatory practices in state closings.) It's against this backdrop that contemporary artists are using the empty buildings to explore the emotional toll that school closures take on residents—entering the fraught education debate whether they intend to or not.

Artists have long realized the emotive power of abandoned places, from the 18th-century French painter Hubert Robert (known as "Hubert Des Ruins") to the 20th-century conceptualists who recognized that neglected buildings can articulate complex social issues. One such example is Gordon Matta-Clark, who in his 1974 project, *Splitting*, famously sawed an ordinary, suburban New Jersey home awaiting demolition down the middle. As the *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff put it: *Splitting* encapsulated "the growing sense that the American dream was evaporating." (A few months later, the house was destroyed.) Similarly, the husband-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher are known for their powerful photographs of the declining industrial era. Taken across Europe and North America, the photos feature abandoned plants and factories whose functions, like those who once worked there, had become obsolete.

But a growing body of contemporary artists are putting forth the idea that a shuttered school can be more poignant than a decaying factory or boarded-up home. As the artists interviewed for this article explained, a deserted school and its remnants are at once more universal and personal than are other objects because they represent both a collective childhood experience and a deeply private one. Generally, there are two approaches in this field of art.

First, there are artists who document the sorrow and frustration felt by parents, students, and teachers, either photographing empty schools or constructing exhibits from the abandoned furniture and supplies inside them. Then there are the artists who engage in an art form called social practice: They tackle policy questions more directly—urging residents to reimagine derelict schools and engage openly with city leaders.

Either way, there are various possibilities for abandoned art as an agent of social change. Ai WeiWei, arguably one of the world's most famous activists, offers a strong precedent for American artists. In his 2009 piece *Remembering*, Ai used 9,000 backpacks to spell out the words "She lived happily in this world for seven years" on the side of a Munich museum, criticizing the Chinese government after thousands of students perished in their shoddy classrooms during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Heaps of dead children's backpacks were found at the site of the demolished schools. Although Chinese authorities initially censored Ai for publishing the names and birthdates of 5,212 student casualties, the government released a tally of student victims—5,335—a year after the quake and months of obfuscation. Today, many credit Ai's backpack installation and ensuing media coverage for the switch in China's policy. When it comes to shut-down schools, perhaps the haunting images of a crumbling auditorium or a jumble of discarded desks help officials empathize with their constituents and better judge neighborhood impact in the future.

For example, in Chicago, evidence has shown that some recent closures have forced children to cross through gang territory to get to their newly assigned schools. In 2013, analyzing the city's annual budget, the Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis questioned whether the additional security costs (guards and Chicago police support) outweighed the estimated $1 billion the district saved in closing 49 schools. What might the physical display of school artifacts—such as Ai's backpacks—do to inform

policymakers versus parent protests or even a hunger strike?

And artists, of course, aren't the only ones to grasp that everyday school items can invoke a shared educational experience and a government's obligation to its youngest citizens. Last month's "Notebooks For Peace," a project based in Charlottesville, Virginia, represented the devastation that a school shooting can have on a community and a nation. Designed by Zoe Bearinger, a senior at the Tandem Friends School and Charlottesville Center for Peace and Justice, it was a display in the city's downtown mall of 262 composition books; a Post-It is tucked inside each notebook with a name and age of a student killed in a school shooting since Columbine. School closures are certainly different from mass shootings and devastating natural disasters. Abandoned school art in Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia may simply reflect the challenges of which city leaders are already keenly aware, however painful closings are for those involved.

* * *

Teachers' Democracy Project, a Baltimore advocacy group, recently posed a question about the threat of school closures: "Why would we close any small, safe and relatively successful school, particularly if it is located in a low-income, Black neighborhood and serves as a vital anchor-institutions?" But the hard reality often has to do with fiscal circumstances. According to *The Baltimore Sun*, the school's 176 students used only 58 percent of the building, its maintenance costs financially draining on the city. Closures certainly stoke feelings of powerlessness, but as Jelani Cobb's *New Yorker* story on the shutting of Jamaica High School in Queens illustrates, educators and reformers have competing views about why cities close schools and whether students always suffer as a result.

A 2011 Pew research study that looked at six cities that have engaged in large-scale school closings—including Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit—

suggests that closures only minimally affect student performance. Achievement measures fell in the final months of a school's existence (the emotional zenith for students and faculty), but tended to rebound or improve afterwards. Still, closures in struggling neighborhoods could have social ripple effects. While there's no direct evidence that they do, closings might make it more difficult for teachers to recognize incoming at-risk students because they don't share an on-going relationship, a key factor education experts believe helps reduce dropout rates. Students living in low-income families were five times more likely to dropout than those from more affluent ones, and since closings are generally clustered in economically challenged communities, they could, over the long term, perpetuate the higher rates of imprisonment among students who don't graduate.

* * *

"The thing about a school that's different is that it's symbolic of a commitment," said the artist Matthew Christopher, who photographs abandoned spaces across the U.S., from Bethlehem Steel warehouses to hospitals, movie theaters, and schools. "Everybody has a different idea of what the American dream is," he said. "But the standard that is agreed upon is that regardless of your background, through hard work, intelligence, and ingenuity you can rise above your station. Closing a school knocks rungs out of the ladder, making it more difficult for kids to improve their lot in life." Photographing what was most recently Julia De Burgos Magnet Middle School in northeast Philadelphia in 2007 and seeing its architectural grandeur—as well as the values the school stood for—in ruins, according to Christopher, was heartbreaking.*

Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

According to Christopher's book, *Abandoned America: The Age of Consequences*, that building (originally the Northeast Manual Training School) was built in either 1890 or 1905 (sources vary), designed to resemble a

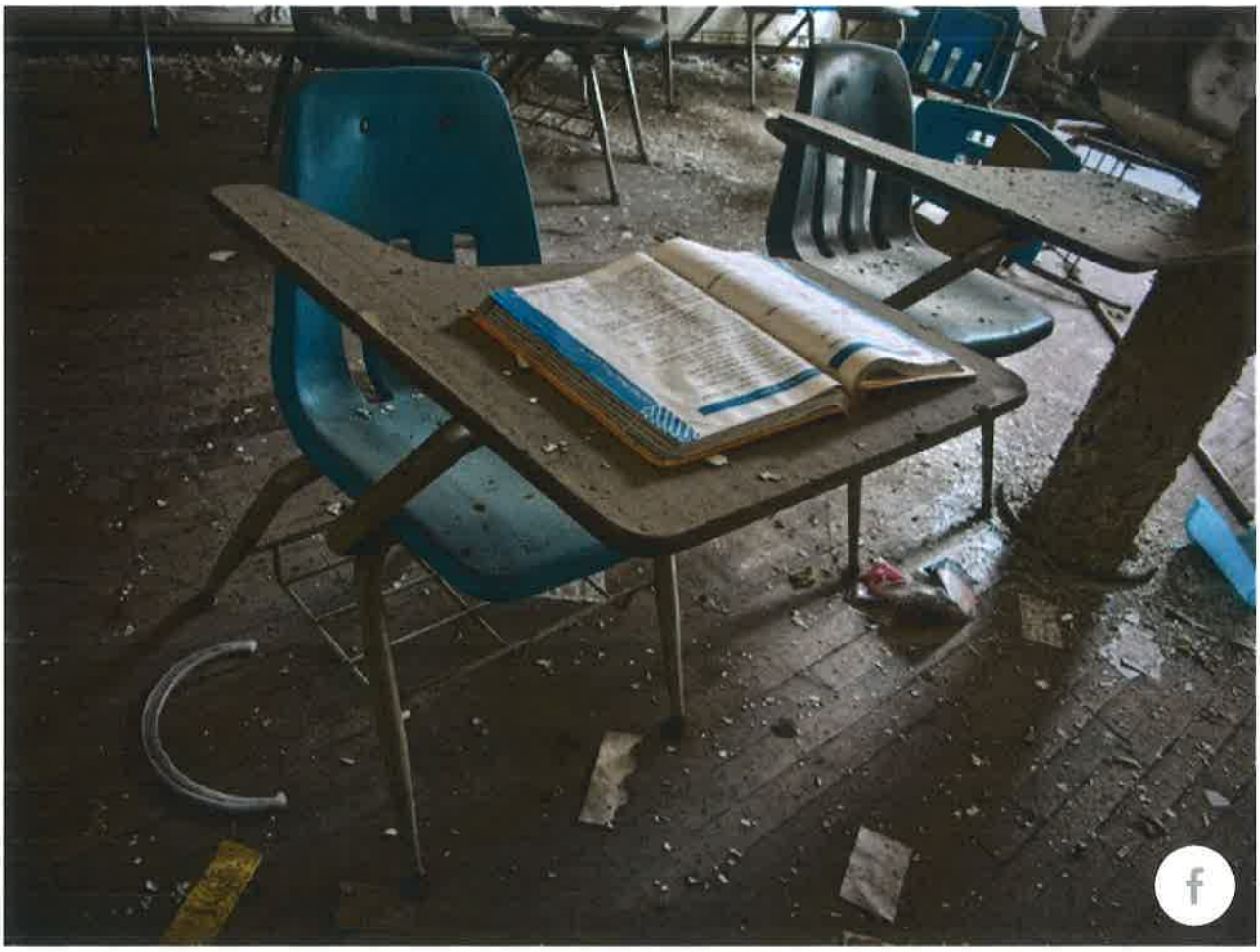
medieval castle with a central tower, turrets, and gargoyles at a time when "the idea of publicly funded school for the working class was progressive and controversial." (Christopher and many others refer to the school as Edison High, the school that occupied the building until the late 1980s.)

Several schools occupied and then left the premises before De Burgos Middle and, by the 1990s, as Christopher describes, the building was infested with rats, textbooks were outdated, and student violence was rampant. Named one of the worst in Philadelphia, the school was eventually taken over by the private-management company Edison Learning, which ultimately vacated the building in 2002, leaving it to vandalism and decay, according to Christopher. In 2011, a four-alarm fire engulfed the building's roof. It was finally demolished in 2013, reportedly making the way for developers to construct a discount supermarket and fast-food restaurant.

Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

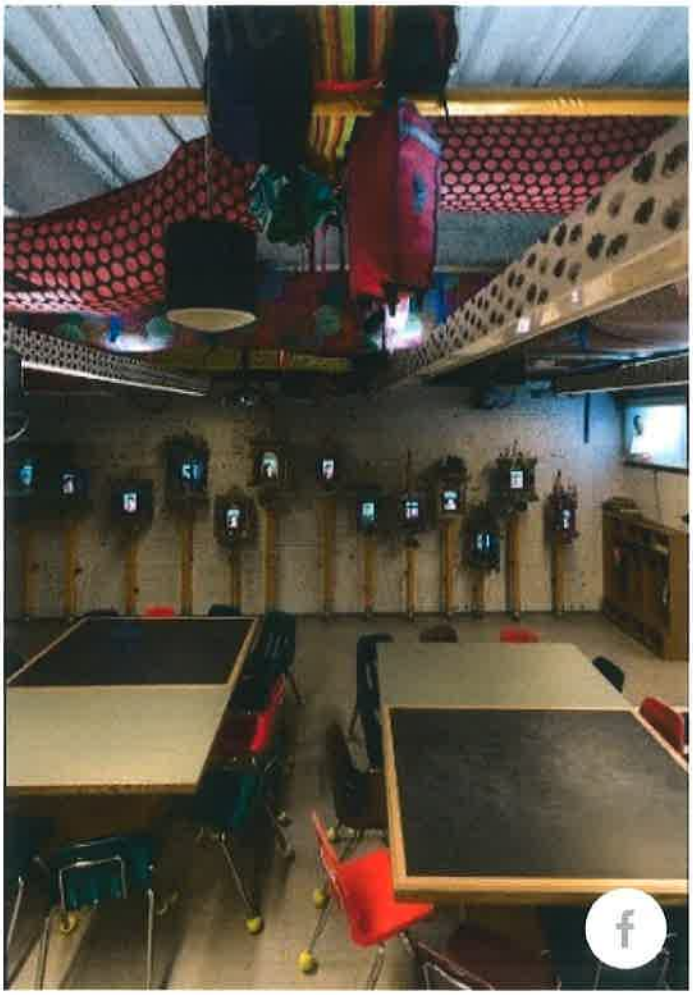


Edison High/De Burgos Middle (Matthew Christopher)

"Trying to fathom how many people had been part of the place, for better or worse, was humbling," wrote Christopher about photographing the Philadelphia school. "There was no reflection or ceremony about it, just a bunch of guys whacking it apart with hammers and power tools." In many ways, this is what his abandoned art—whether a photograph of a school or a Detroit auto factor—strives to do: reflect upon the complex, emotional history of a building and the city around it, while paying a ceremonial respect to those who spent so many hours of their lives inside.

Meanwhile, an anonymous artist known as Detroiturbex is documenting Detroit's economic hardship, by photographing abandoned schools and other buildings around the city—an area that was built for 2 million people but now

has only around 700,000. The photographer pairs then-and-now pictures of an abandoned school with research about a neighborhood's particular trends, giving viewers a visual history of Detroit's social challenges, the automotive industry, and the Great Recession.



Pepón Osorio, reForm installation
(Constance Mensh/ Temple Contemporary)

The artist Pepon Osorio's latest project for its part responds to the recent state of Philadelphia school closings. A professor of community art at Temple University and a 1999 recipient of the MacArthur "genius award," Osorio is known for merging conceptual art with civic engagement to create highly personalized installations. For his current show, "*reForm*," he salvaged chalkboards, lockers, and chairs from nearby Fairhill elementary, one of the 24 Philadelphia schools shuttered in 2013, and reinstalled them in the basement of Temple's Tyler School of Art. Every morning, Osorio said, he

would bike past the Fairhill building, struck by the chained doors and what he describes as "the heavy feeling of abandonment that seemed to surround the place, like an architectural ghost"—but also by a sense of urgency. Where did all the children and teachers go? What does this abandoned building cost the neighborhood?

And so his idea of an art show to portray the effects of school closures was born. Funded with a $300,000 Pew Center for Arts and Heritage grant, Osorio encouraged former Fairhill students to cover the walls of the Tyler classroom with written accounts of their own experiences, transcribed on oversized lined paper to resemble school notebooks. For example, 17-year-old Jacob Rodriguez, who attended Fairhill student from kindergarten through eighth grade, penciled: "Whenever I see the school and the ruins, I wanna break into tears." There's also a video loop of students' oral testimony —conveying the fears that, without a neighborhood school, they and their friends are more likely to land in jail.

Pepón Osorio, reForm installation
(Constance Mensh/ Temple Contemporary)

According to Osorio, *reForm* is more than art—it's both a place for displaced students to gather and define their future on their own terms and, hopefully, a catalyst for Philadelphians to discuss their city's wave of school closures. "The objects are secondary to the stories of the people I work with," said Osorio, who's a product of Puerto Rico's public schools. "My work is political. There's no way around it. But at the same time, I'm interested in the real grief and pain these students feel."

Some art goes even further, aiming to sway public policy by providing the city with their own proposals for how to repurpose its empty school buildings. This fall, using an increasingly popular art form that focuses on civic and communal engagement known as social practice, an artist project, the Stockyard Institute, has issued an open call to Chicago residents to develop site-specific design proposals for their city's abandoned schools. Early next year, the Stockyard Institute plans to present a catalogue of ideas —*Reimagining Abandoned Schools*—to Mayor Rahm Emanuel's office.

"Our goal is to present the mayor and the board of education with a map of social change and possibility," explained Jim Duignan, a DePaul University art professor and Stockyard Institute's founder. "We have all of these abandoned schools around Chicago now, what would first graders do with them? What about an architect or designer or teacher? Does the neighborhood need a women's health center? A vertical garden?" Although, he asked, during one of our interviews, guess what a group of students at John Hay Elementary proposed for the best use of an abandoned Chicago school? A school.

** This article previously referred to the abandoned school that Matthew Christopher photographed as Thomas A.*

Edison High School, the school that occupied the building before Julia De Burgos Middle. We regret the error.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JACOBA URIST is a contributing journalist for NBC News.

Kirsh, Andrea. “Martha Wilson, Nick Cave and Pepon Osorio in New York City.” *theartblog.com* September 27, 2011 http://theartblog.org/2011/09/martha-wilson-nick-cave-and-pepon-osorio-in-new-york-city/#more-23329

Martha Wilson, Nick Cave and Pepon Osorio in New York City

By andrea kirsh | September 27, 2011

Pepon Osorio ‘Drowned in A Glass of Water’ (2010) mixed media, Ronald Feldman Gallery

Pepon Osorio’s exhibition at Ronald Feldman Gallery (through Oct. 22, 2011) consists of one large installation in each of two rooms. *Drowned in a Glass of Water* revolves on a huge platform, each side revealing a tableaux of contrasting domestic scenes. Osorio has an ability similar to Edward Kienholz’s, of evoking human vulnerability through forms that suggest the human despite being only partially figural (or having figural attributes). The living-room of a modest home is cramped and chaotic. A large woman looms over the scene; she wears a red and white, crocheted ballgown and her arms are covered with bandages. In front of her is a wheelchair occupied by a figure, represented by a video screen which shows the hands of a woman crocheting the red and white yarn of the dress. Is the large figure a mannekin, or a dream of the incapacitated, knitting woman? Or are there two women in the room? A boy in a football helmet sits at the back, watching television; his back is to the room and to us, the viewers. Balloons with get-well wishes sit on a shelf, implying that someone is recuperating. The shelves are otherwise filled with a multitude of gimcrack figurines, the floor is littered with toys and a toppled, miniature Christmas tree.

The reverse of the platform is occupied by a sleeker and more monied scene: on a hospital litter lies a figure in the guise of a video screen again, whose imagery implies the interior of the body at a molecular level. Beside it a golden heart sits on the ground, covered in a glass bell jar of sorts, upon which rests a gold pocket watch. On the back wall in an elaborate, gold frame is a moving image of a waterfall. It’s impossible not to associate it with the flickering waterfall of Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, but I can’t figure out what to make of that association. A mirror reflects an image of a woman’s mouth, eating from a silver spoon.

The work in the second room, *Todo o nada (All or Nothing)*, is clearer in its references. To approach it we pass through security gates to find the bruised face of a boy looking out the window of a modest house, as we hear the voice of his mother who describes finding him beaten. Both works evoke the harshness of everyday life which, even for the wealthy, includes our common mortality. Osorio’s work is full of references to pain, yet the very efforts he puts into the representations implies some optimism, or at least hope of redemption. But the imagery of figures mired in difficulties pervades this exhibition.

Casas, Rafael Diaz. "Pepon Osorio." *ArtNexus*, 10, no. 83, 2011. pp. 122-23.

Pepón Osorio

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery

In his first solo show in New York since 2005, Pepón Osorio (Puerto Rico 1955) is back "con to' los hierros" at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery. This good-humored exhibition is a tour de force of four recent works in which Osorio uses performance and social sculpture to maintain an active dialogue with the community.

In the storefront of the gallery, and welcoming the exhibition, is *El Arresto (The Arrest) (2011)*, a live performance collaboration with a fully tattooed Latino artist, Jason Gómez. The performer, using a pose that imitates the well-known Scared Heart of Jesus tableaux, sits still behind a 3D sheet of holographic plastic glass that creates a surreal distortion of his image. His eyes fill with tears (in fact, a bloody one seems to escape silently out of the end of one eye) in a way that enhances the realism of the "holy vision." His outfit – jeans, a white wife-beater-shirt and a Yankee cap – defines him as an urbanite. Still he seems to be naked, dressed entirely by the green chain-of-thorns tattoo drawn as an endless snake across his exposed torso.

El Arresto creates a space of philosophical reflection between the sacred and the mundane. The urban-sanctified character is a contradictory image, a representation of beauty and anger. His look is commonly associated with law offenders but he is the incarnation of the One who paid with his body for our collective sins. The holographic vision of a live Jesus is a mischievous reference to the deep religiosity of a significant segment of the Puertorican and Latino communities, and rooted in popular culture. Traditions and customs that define a culture are used as mechanisms to carry out an identity apart from the global one imposed by multicultural and media interaction, like the coming-to-age celebration for girls who reach 15.

Quinceañera (2011) is a plastic hand decorated with a synthetic orchid holding a paper plate covered with aluminum foil, suggesting the leftovers after a party. The idea is reinforced by the vinyl text next to the piece that describes a friend's enjoyment at the end of the party, when partygoers argue about who is going to take home the table centerpiece and extra cake.

The pride and joy of the show, *Drowned in a Glass of Water (2010)*, is an 18-foot rotating platform that reconstructs the home environments of two families of contrasting wealth, divided by a wall of mirror. On one side there is an overcrowded living room of a lower middle class family in which a female figure takes center stage, a mother perhaps. Her open arms are directed to a wheelchair where a monitor rests and in which a character seems to live. A child is sinking his face and attention into a television set that does not show programming. The space contains a disproportional amount of domestic objects that refer to family life. On the other side of the platform, a hospital stretcher on which a monitor rests stands beside a swimming pool on a quiet manicured lawn. On the wall behind, a kitschy moving picture of a waterfall hangs. The quietness of the space is forcibly staged.

*Drowned...*is a community-based work created under the sponsorship of Williams College in Massachusetts, after a year of sharing personal experiences with local families. Before being shown at the college's art museum, the piece was exhibited to the community at an abandoned car dealership. It is a vital step into the artist's creative process that allows those involved to negotiate and interact with the piece in a non-traditional art setting. The installation translates personal memories into a collective narrative while exploring the possible dynamics involved in nourishing an individual, a family, or a community. It employs family-based stories to build up a community history, inviting the viewers to analyze who they are and where they stand, personally and socially.

Overpowering the gallery space is *All or Nothing (2011)*, a large installation of plastic shingles covering all walls, along with metal security doors placed at the gates. It recreates a window from which a video loop of the face of an urban teenager is seen. From time to time a hand appears to apply make-up to the face to make it look beat up, while a mother's voiceover recounts her son's beating. At the other side of the wall is the back of the teenager and a double set of bulls-eye targets built out of a table from which a kitschy lamp sticks out, and a human skeleton attached with darts hangs.

All or Nothing is a reference to the invasion of reality television, a good-natured piece that debates the back-and-forth contradiction

between reality and life. Perhaps it is also a contemplation of how the human body as a societal unit can convey polyvalent and multi-semantic contradictions, depending on how it is treated. It questions how much the media is an accurate reflection of the realm.

Mr. Osorio through the years has kept a dynamic commitment between his cultural persona and an evolving society. In this show, his kitschy over-embellished language is toned down in favor of a more explicit conceptual discourse.

Rafael Díaz Casas

Pepón Osorio. *Drowned in a Glass of Water*, 2010. Mixed media and video installation. Photo: Eleanore Hopper. Courtesy: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Way, Cynthia. *"Pepón Osorio: Drowned in a Glass of Water"*, Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, July 17-February 6, 2011.

DROWNED IN A GLASS OF WATER

pepón osorio

NORTH ADAMS | JULY 17–SEPTEMBER 7, 2010
WILLIAMSTOWN | SEPTEMBER 25, 2010–FEBRUARY 6, 2011

WILLIAMS COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

PHOTO BY MARK McCARTY

PHOTO BY MARK McCARTY

Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Pepón Osorio has exhibited his work internationally and is the recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and teaches at the Tyler School of Art.

pepón osorio's multimedia installation,

Drowned in a Glass of Water, represents the stories of two local families, transforming personal memory into collective narrative. Created through a process of social engagement, the installation is a reflection of the artist and the communities from which it arose. Although Osorio's methodology involves collaboration at every level—from families who share their stories to students who produce visual elements, his artistic vision directs the entire process. He presents his work first in an untraditional community-based site, then a museum, exploring how the meaning of art shifts in different contexts. Overwhelming in scale and detail, *Drowned in a Glass of Water* challenges viewers to negotiate their relationship to the artwork and the place of art in their lives.

Coming to town once a month for a year, Osorio conducted a series of conversations that provided input for his artistic project. He visited local farms, partnered with community organizations, and worked closely with museum staff, college faculty, and students to understand the dynamics of a rural environment that was unfamiliar to him. He gravitated toward the tensions between a college town and its neighboring city, which translated into a vision for an 18-foot rotating platform that separates, links, and blurs scenes on either side of an 8-foot wall. Osorio was interested in how community members in both places navigate their terrain, where they live, work, attend school, or go to the grocery store. He was exploring his own journey as well, from a working-class family in Puerto Rico to a board member at elite institutions; sometimes he finds himself at one extreme or the other, or "within the wall."

Osorio chose to juxtapose the stories of two families. He identified the first family through his typical method of partnering with social service agencies, in this case, the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition in North Adams. His connection to this family was immediate, with a clear sense of trust—crucial to the process of exchanging deeply personal stories. Osorio met the second family through social gatherings in Williamstown; by this time, he was on the lookout for similarities and contrasts to the first family's story. Food became a critical part of this dialogic process as an icebreaker or a form of exchange for people from different backgrounds. A central question emerged: What nourishes an individual, a family, or a community?

"I'm really interested in discovering how art can nourish us," Osorio explains. "I spent weeks visiting with the families and learning their stories. I was looking for differences between the communities, but I ultimately found commonalities."

Riding home on the train to Philadelphia, Osorio was flooded with visual images to recreate the families' stories. He then asked the curator and interns to find specific objects—clocks and figurines in antique stores, plastic deer heads purchased online, and sparkling tub mats from Family Dollar. In his selection of what he calls "rescued" objects, he is acting like a "social anthropologist." The objects have potency, symbolic not only of the family story but also broader themes. Osorio looks for a "common denominator"—an icon or aesthetic that is resonant for a particular community. He then asked interns to manipulate the surfaces, textures, and colors of the objects to meet his aesthetic goals.

The first site of the installation became an artist's studio integrated into the daily life of North Adams. A former Chevrolet dealership, the space featured expansive windows looking onto busy Route 2 and the mountains beyond. As the artist built the installation with museum staff and interns, passersby observed the progress. Light, sounds, and reflections from the street streamed in, creating an open atmosphere more conducive to conversation than a traditional, quieted museum. "What *is* this?" people asked. "Art," responded Osorio, inviting them inside.

One side of the installation reconstructs the interior of a family's home: a living room scene over-crowded with furniture, figurines, toys—décor that evokes the country, popular culture, the accumulation of family history. The backdrop, which recalls a folk art aesthetic, depicts the actual view that Osorio saw whenever he visited the family. The mother figure is portrayed by a mannequin covered in Band-Aids and wearing a ruby red crocheted dress, elegant yet somehow hurt. Derived from a crafts pattern for a doll-like decoration and expanded to exaggerated proportions, this dress was crocheted by 23 individuals from Pennsylvania to Vermont; the process itself symbolizes community support that the mother figure needs.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS CURATED BY CYNTHIA WAY, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND VISITOR EXPERIENCE, WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF MAGGIE AD

On the opposite side of the wall, the exterior of another family's home is pared down to minimal details set against a manicured landscape. A fabricator, who creates displays at natural history museums, molded a life-like tree, installed Astroturf, and added moss, weeds, and leaves to evoke a naturalistic Berkshire landscape. The waves in the swimming pool are drawings of puzzle pieces; these details are echoed in the other scene where actual puzzle pieces surround a plastic swimming pool. Other themes, such as nature, time, and medical assistance, find parallels on each side, indicating the differences and commonalities between the families. Throughout the installation, video elements combine still images with animation of rising and falling water, referencing the title. Most still images show what is behind the monitor (e.g., a picture of the picture on the wall), a double take that calls into question what is real.

Osorio was trying to convey the truth, as he saw it, of the families' stories through these "visual sentences and phrases." In one scene, web-like forms connect the mother to her son and daughter, while police cars surround the family. In the other, a bright orange stretcher, covered with a crumpled white sheet, disrupts a placid backyard where diamonds glisten on mushrooms. We see a home's interior, in a state of chaos but overflowing with love and support; opposite, we see another home's exterior, elegant and spare, suffering loss. In each story, clocks mark the moment that tragedy struck, shattering the routine of daily life. The artwork asks: How do people cope with vulnerability and overwhelming problems? The title of the piece derives from a saying about how

life's problems can seem so large we feel "drowned in a glass of water."

Viewers are meant to weave together a narrative that links the visual information with their own experiences. However, the artwork revolves around the stories of real people, kept confidential, biographical clues obscured. Knowing the artist's intentions and basic story line adds another dimension to interpretation. For the interior scene, the mother received an eviction notice, turning her world upside down. The little girl wishes for her father to return, playing with male dolls, while the boy copes by watching TV. In the exterior scene, a man with "a heart of gold" passed away. He was the "source of it all," like the water in the gold-framed picture of the falls from Mt. Greylock. In bereavement, his wife became preoccupied with being cared for; the empty spoon in the video reflects how the act of nourishment was more important than the food. Both families suffer loss, despite their different resources. Yet each is rich in its own way.

This artwork takes on additional resonance and tension from the fact that the families are from North Adams and Williamstown and the piece is exhibited in both of these locations. Osorio rooted the work in specific lives; however, in positioning the Williamstown family (the exterior scene with "gold" elements) as having abundant resources and the North Adams family (interior, "silver") as having limited resources, he re-presents a stereotype that many people living in this area have fought against. Osorio says he did not intend to typify the whole

PHOTO BY ARTHUR EVANS

PHOTO BY ARTHUR EVANS

PHOTO BY CYNTHIA WAY

identity of each town; he chose to present what he calls "the obvious" in order to prompt conversation about "the complexity beyond the stereotype."

The rotating installation places viewers in the opposing extremes simultaneously, thereby diffusing the argument of the stereotype. By putting families from two social classes on equal standing, unifying two sides, Osorio claims that we are all essentially the same. The mirrored panels and seam on the wall invite viewers to find themselves somewhere in the continuum and to consider their expectations of the ideal of wealth. The rotation not only makes it hard to see, but also forces viewers to look at everything, not where they are most interested. This reflects the process of understanding itself—unfolding slowly, differently, expansively over time. In dealing with two extremes and the spaces between, the installation holds in uneasy balance issues of class, the rise and fall of fortune, history and the present, pain and healing.

Osorio elicits dialogue by creating an uncomfortable aesthetic space, built upon oppositions, where viewers wrestle with contradiction and complexity. In directing a collaboration with people in the community, then exhibiting the resulting artwork in two sites—one integrated into a neighborhood, one inside a museum—Osorio's innovative artistic practice expands and complicates notions of the "public" in public art. As the installation moves from the North Adams community to the Williams College Museum of Art to other sites without this local history, what questions will it ask of the public it engages?

Cynthia Way, Director of Education and Visitor Experience

PEPÓN OSORIO (American, b. 1955)
Drowned in a Glass of Water, 2010
mixed media installation
Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

IMAGES IN THIS BROCHURE FEATURE
the artist Pepón Osorio working with Williams College students and staff to create *Drowned in a Glass of Water*.

, CLASS OF 2010; CAROLINE O'CONNELL, CLASS OF 2011; JENNIFER OSWALD, CLASS OF 2011; AND SHELLEY WILLIAMSON, CLASS OF 2010.

My process of working with the community so intricately has been like weaving. I am weaving together stories of the community. I am interested in the democratization of the artistic process. It's not just about what I achieve from making the art, but about what the participants can discover about themselves through their involvement. PEPÓN OSORIO

PHOTO BY MARK McCARTY

PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA WAY

To celebrate the 10th anniversary

of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, the Williams College Museum of Art has commissioned a work by the distinguished artist Pepón Osorio and organized a symposium on October 2, 2010 entitled, "The Place of Taste: An Exploration of Food, Culture, and Community." Osorio's installation, *Drowned in a Glass of Water*, exemplifies, on a grand, three-dimensional scale, *Gastronomica*'s commitment to the visual arts and the social dimensions of food. The journal has from the start examined food in relation to culture and society by publishing essays, fiction, poetry, and art that aim to provoke—to make readers think about not only the pleasure of food but also its darker side. How we choose to nourish ourselves is both an intellectual act and an aesthetic one. Osorio's art profoundly engages the cultural contexts and consequences of our various hungers.

On first glance we are dazzled by Osorio's installation, but before long we grow uncomfortable, too, as we reflect on its deeper meanings. What does nourishment consist of? Food and water are the ready answer, but Osorio's artwork also examines nourishment of a different sort, one that is rooted in our sense of place and the ways in which our environment enriches us, or fails to. For this installation, Osorio ventured beyond the urban territory he knows, to the rural communities of the northern Berkshires. He looked beyond our beautiful landscape to discover what many overlook—the vulnerability of the people living here. Underneath its exuberant decoration, *Drowned in a Glass of Water* exposes hunger, both the actual sort and the kind that is driven by needs other than physical. As Osorio's installation revolves, it causes us to confront the lives of strangers; it also forces us to confront ourselves and our own environment in its mirrored surfaces. Osorio brilliantly conveys a sense of place both external and internal, familiar and strange. Even as *Drowned in a Glass of Water* remains rooted to a culturally specific place, it universalizes, making us think about how we nourish our senses and our selves, through both beauty and place.

Darra Goldstein
Gastronomica Editor-in-Chief and
Francis Christopher Oakley Third Century Professor of Russian at Williams

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FOOD AND CULTURE:

Patricia Allen. *Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance in the American Agrifood System.*
E.N. Anderson. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture.*
David Bell and Gil Valentine. *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat.*
Carol Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader.*
Marjorie DeVault. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work.*
Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed. *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink.*
Harvey Levenstein. *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America.*
David Sutton. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory.*
Amy B. Trubek. *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir.*
Allen S. Weiss. *Taste Nostalgia.*
Mark Winne. *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty.*
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PHOTO BY MARK McCARTY

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This brochure has been made possible by Patti, Frank, and Johanna Kolodny.

McQuaid, Cate. “How the Other Half Lives: Two Homes, Two Communities Go On Display In Williams College Exhibit.” *The Boston Globe Online,* October 3, 2010. http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2010/10/03/pepn_osorios_williams_college_exhibit_examines_how_the_other_half_lives/

The Boston Globe

How the other half lives

Two homes, two communities go on display in Williams College exhibit

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | October 3, 2010

NORTH ADAMS — The first thing Pepón Osorio noticed when he came to town to work on his art installation “Drowned in a Glass of Water’’ was how different this artsy but beleaguered old industrial city is from its immediate neighbor, Williamstown, a manicured college town that has dubbed itself “the village beautiful.’’

“Homes in Williamstown were a little more separated from the street,’’ Osorio observed. “In North Adams, there’s a shortening of that space, more accessibility to the interior of the homes.’’

Distinctions both subtle and obvious drive “Drowned in a Glass of Water,’’ which spent the summer inside a former Chevy dealership amid the old brick industrial buildings on the eastern side of town. On Sept. 25, the exhibit officially reopened at the Williams College Museum of Art, which commissioned the project.

Taking a break from preparing the installation for its move to the museum last month, Osorio settled down at a table just inside the Chevy dealer’s door to talk about the project, which was prompted by an invitation to the museum from Gastronomica, the food journal. The installation is about two communities, but Osorio got to know those communities around kitchen tables.

“I ate a lot. I’m on a diet now,’’ said Osorio, 55, a gregarious, Puerto Rican-born artist whose home is now Philadelphia. “We had communal meals in people’s homes. Organic food and Cheez Doodles.’’

Shared meals were only the starting point for “Drowned in a Glass of Water.’’

“It wasn’t necessary for the work of art to be about eating,’’ says Lisa Corrin, director of the Williams College Museum. “Symbolically, it’s about breaking bread and getting to know each other.’’

Osorio approaches his work with an anthropologist’s eye. He has won a MacArthur fellowship for his art, which often involves spending weeks or months in conversation with a community before he creates an artwork that portrays it. “Drowned in a Glass of Water’’ takes a magic-realist approach to examining what Williamstown and North Adams share and how they differ. The piece spins on an 18-foot turntable with a wall down the middle.

“I wanted to contrast and revolve, so that it’s not either-or, but we see [both sides] simultaneously,’’ Osorio said. After months of meeting locals, Osorio chose to focus on one family from each town. The Williamstown family is represented on one side of the wall, and the North Adams family on the other. Objects and materials tell the family’s stories: The Williamstown family’s father died of cancer. The North Adams family was served an eviction notice, fought back, and stayed in their home.

Astroturf carpets the Williamstown side, and there’s a swimming pool, but there’s also a gurney on the lawn, denoting the loss of the father. That side of the wall is mirrored, reflecting the viewer and surroundings. The North Adams side features a living room crowded with figures and objects — including a mannequin in a gaudy, pink, hand-crocheted dress that looks like a birthday cake, several toy police cars, and a wheelchair.

When Osorio visited the North Adams family, he said, “I sat in the living room and I started to see wheelchairs everywhere. I didn’t say anything. Then, at the end, I said, ‘What’s up with the wheelchairs?’ ‘Oh,’ the mother said, ‘that’s

my grandfather.' ''

The man was a Williamstown resident who had lost all his money and ended up in North Adams, Osorio said.

A video showing on the television in the North Adams section shows water rising and receding. It hints at some kind of threat — such as the chance that the family might have been evicted. "They're drowning in a glass of water,'' Osorio said.

Straddling the class divide between North Adams and Williamstown, the work has generated intrigue and discomfort in some viewers. Across the street from the Chevy dealership, at the Crystal Hard Hat Saloon, bar owner Todd Hebert kept an eye on the project over the summer.

"It's off the wall,'' said Hebert, a burly, bearded man with the easy manner of a friendly neighborhood barkeep. "I've seen people walk over and look at it. People won't go in during the day, but they stop by at night and look through the windows.''

Hebert said he was a fine arts major in college, so he gets it, but he's not sure about the wall in the middle of the turntable. "Williamstown and North Adams are the same. A couple of miles different,'' he said. "Williamstown is a little prettier. It's like a $1,000 dress on a woman instead of a $100 dress. They look the same. But this one [North Adams] is spending the other $900 on what's really needed.''

Setting up an art installation in an old Chevy dealership shattered a lot of expectations. People interacted with it differently than they would have in a museum. Every day, museum staff sat in the dealership and found themselves in conversation with visitors.

"Each person who came in had a question. 'This is art?' 'What is this supposed to be?' '' Corrin said. A museum, she pointed out, offers a more quiet, introspective experience. When she spent a few hours at the dealership, a woman came in with her autistic son. Corrin offered to watch the boy as his mother took in the installation.

"She said, 'I like this piece. I really understand the relationship between the two families. I know a family in Williamstown with an autistic child,' '' Corrin reported. "They might think they have nothing else in common, but the disability had brought them together.''

Osorio carefully guards the identities of both families, and wouldn't allow a reporter to talk with them.

"I have a theory that working-class people are more willing to have their lives opened up. They are more susceptible,'' he said. In Williamstown, he added, "people are reserved and cautious of having an artist turn them inside out and tell their stories in public.''

He invited both families in to view the installation privately before it opened. "I needed their blessing,'' Osorio said.

Ashley Benson, a social worker working with the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition who helped Osorio find the North Adams family, says they enjoyed the opening. "The mother was absolutely thrilled and taken aback,'' she said. "She was very proud, but also I think she felt like she had contributed to the community.''

The Williamstown woman, Osorio said, was a little put off by the implication of a divide. "She thought it was elegant and recognized it as her own space,'' Osorio said. "But she didn't like the wall. She wanted it knocked down. She didn't see that much separation between the two places.''

For Osorio, the division between the communities may be an illusion — that's why he has them set up on a turntable, so they appear to mix and meld, and why the wall is mirrored.

He doesn't see one side as better off than the other. "People accumulate and accumulate, and there's a fear of emptiness,'' he noted. He could have been talking about the opulence in his rendering of Williamstown, or the jam-packed North Adams living room. "Both places,'' he said, "are extremely beautiful.''

Cate McQuaid can be reached at cmcq@speakeasy.net. ■

Burton, Jazmyn. "Project addresses incarceration through art." *Temple Times*, April 26, 2007, p. 8.

Project addresses incarceration through art

Photo by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

The incarceration rate in Pennsylvania's Latino community is among the highest in the country. As a result, generational patterns of imprisonment are continuing to strain the lives of those who are left behind to heal from the effects of losing a family member to the prison system.

In an attempt to bring this issue to the forefront, the Tyler School of Art's Pepón Osorio and students in his "Art in Community" program collaborated with local families, artists, mentors and community agencies to create "Badge of Honor: The Project."

The art installation project, which has been brewing for a little over a year in North Philadelphia, is based on the concept that it takes more than one person or approach to heal an entire community.

Over the spring semester, students worked closely with local families who have been affected by incarceration to craft pieces of art that reflect their loss, healing, growth and strong family ties. The art is permanently installed in the families' homes.

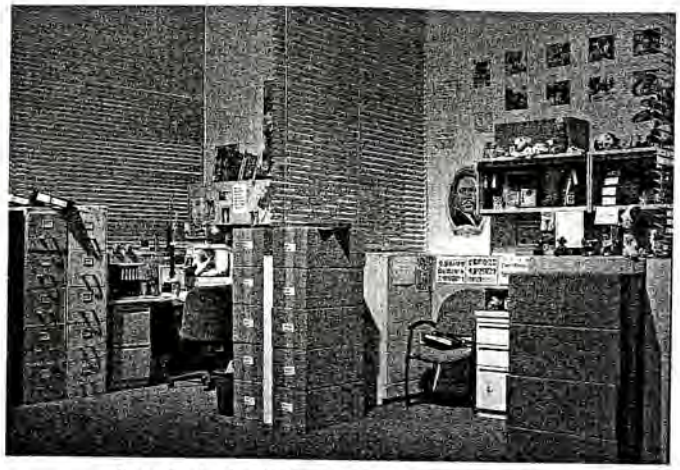
Before-and-after photographs of the installations — collectively titled "Badge of Honor" — are on display through June 8, with an opening reception for on Thursday, April 26, at the Lighthouse community center. The event will include a performance by Las Gallas Artist Collective and a reconstruction of Osorio's original "Badge of Honor" installation. Created in 1995, the original "Badge of Honor" consisted of two full-scale rooms that parallel the life of a young man and his incarcerated father.

When: Opening reception on Thursday, April 26, 5:30–9 p.m. Exhibition on display until June 8.

Where: The Lighthouse, 152 W. Lehigh Ave. at the corner of Macher Street.

— Jazmyn Burton

Demos, T.J. "Pepon Osorio."
Artforum XLIII (January 2005: 186.



Pepón Osorio, *Face to Face*, 2004, mixed-media installation.

PHILADELPHIA

PEPÓN OSORIO

INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

After completing a three-year volunteer residency at Philadelphia's Department of Human Services, Pepón Osorio elaborately reconstructed its offices in the galleries of the ICA. *Face to Face* (all works 2004), one of three installations shown here, was assembled from re-created materials from the DHS—desks full of case histories, computer terminals, and sundry office supplies. Claustrophobic and windowless, it made one feel as though lost inside a real government bureaucracy, which metes out death by drab repetition and administrative protocol. Signs of the struggle with dehumanization were everywhere: Caged in a large steel-wire bin piled up with the possessions of a client family, a video narrated the mother's harrowing story of her suicidal son, juxtaposed with footage of him as a once-happy toddler. Reproduced family photos and inspirational posters taped to the walls above desks personalized otherwise oppressively generic cubicles.

In the next gallery, *Trials and Turbulence* simulated a family courtroom, complete with a judge's bench, audience chairs, and an institutional-gray carpet. In the center, an ornate wood-and-glass vitrine borrowed from a forgotten department store held a meticulous diorama of a messy tenement bathroom. On the shower curtain was projected a video of a young woman named Adrienne who volunteered an intimate account of her ordeals growing up in foster care. Adjacent to the vitrine was *Run Mikey Run*, a large video projection of a boy sprinting away from us but failing to recede into the distance. Barely visible through the cracks of a large wooden barrier built from pallets salvaged from the streets of North Philadelphia, the monumental image rather bluntly symbolized both the desire for escape and its depressing futility.

Framed as institutional critique, Osorio's installations recontextualize the DHS in order to examine its problems. The maneuver draws on the gallery as a creative refuge in order to humanize a deadening system. But ultimately this strategy was hindered by the artist's good intentions. Not only did the show present an idealized view of art as a silver bullet, but there was a corresponding misrecognition of the installation's own point of reference: When presented in a museum, a focus on administrative order and legalistic structure risks revealing first and foremost the art institution's own banal bureaucracy. While this might recall the early years of Institutional Critique, typified by Michael Asher's removal of the wall separating a gallery's display area from its office in an effort to unmask the prosaic business operations behind art's supposedly ideal autonomy, such allusions are inadvertent. This is the problem. Rather than deploying a reflexive intelligence, Osorio's project regurgitates an old-fashioned realism in the form of theatrical set design. Museumgoers are surely well aware of the dreary reality of governmental social services, and what was offered here was ultimately little more than sentimental, if earnest, compassion.

—T.J. Demos

Kartofel, Graciela. "Pepón Osorio." *Art Nexus* vol. 1, no. 47, 2003, pp. 132-133.

Pepón Osorio

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

In his new installation and sculpture exhibition, Pepón Osorio has recreated an island within an island —Puerto Rico in Manhattan, and in a larger sense the island of immigrants within the United States of America. This is not a new topic, but the work is a significant aesthetic experience. The artist and his circumstance, the immigrant's history and their circumstance, all of these have been the theme of many an art show; here, however, language is virtual as well as direct. We get the objects, we get the voices, and through it all we perceive a well handled "absence of the human". Some will say that there is a human figure in the computer screen, but there you go precisely: *that* is the evil, the hierarchy of absence, the wound of solitude and nostalgia that characterizes almost all immigrants.

Osorio's show was promoted as "two new works: *Cara a Cara*, a multimedia installation recreating the offices of the Bureau of Social Services, and *My Beating Hearts*, a sculpture." These pieces, however, complement each other —multiplicity and unity—; the contrast between them actually increases the effect of synergy derived from contrasts and sounds. The installation revolves around a closed office on the right side, a hermetic-looking cubicle, against whose back wall a human figure is projected; to the left there are venetian blinds and in the center a chain mail cage filled with things such as desks, TV and video equipment, computers, tables, roll-up curtains, office supplies, boxes, file cabinets, photographs, an a varied paraphernalia of personal objects belonging to the unseen workers.

This is not just a mere piling up of things, but a anxious, verbalized, oppressive accusation. It seems innocuous and inert, but it is charged with a feelings of entrapment and nostalgia, filled with, above all, contrasts of life and death. Osorio is telling us that what is lost and what is gained in the act of migration cannot be measured together, because loss and gain are two very different matters. Some things are immaterial and difficult to apprehend: freedom, education vs. family, cultural heritages, aromas, popular traditions, walking rhythms, climate. Others are more quantifiable — these don't require mention: we all know what they are.

Baroque would not be an inaccurate description of these works. In the installation, because the disturbing effect of accumulation and expressiveness. In the intensely red sculpture *My Beating Heart*, the baroque impulse manifests itself through the marked contrast of an otherwise empty room with a single large format, mixed technique piece suspended in its center. Comparing one room to the other, we could easily hear somebody casually comment that "what's missing here is there," or that "bureaucracy leaves no room for the heart." The heart represents Latin America's intense expressiveness. The topic of the heart in reference to religion, such as has been explored frequently in Mexico, is in this case the complement to the installation in the next room. Osorio's suspended sculpture is like a pendant or a necklace; its exact opposite is the gigantic *piñata* of an anonymous bureaucracy. A microphone, integrated at the level of the sectioned valves, amplifies the beating of the artist's heart.

In our 21st century society, the border between the intimately private and the public has disappeared. The topic of borders is also part of Osorio's show, but it can only be mentioned in passing here. Where does institutional action begin, and where does it end? How does one confront "Face to Face" extreme family and institutional situations? How to survive what for some are restrictions of freedom and for others perfectly correct practices? How many boxes are necessary to store away pain? How does one prepare/repair an individual who's being fragmented and archived in files, boxes, cabinets? How to live in a state of dissociation? How can the body inhabit one place while the heart lives somewhere else? Exposed daily, beating softly, this heart makes evident the situation "in the flesh" that the artist is pointing out. Photographed images, filmed, reproduced, projected images: all of them play a role in emphasizing the absence of real human beings. Image and sound record modern art's trans-disciplinarity, what authors of a century ago wished for, but languages and disciplines have transformed and expanded. Osorio's venetian blinds work as dividers, as containers, as a fragile frame through which "oxygen" escapes, as an eloquent projection screen.

Osorio developed this work during his year as Artist in Residence with the Philadelphia Department of Human Services. With his background in social work, Pepón Osorio brings to the visual arts a voice more encompassing than the merely individual. He extends the documentary gaze to an emergency room in which special attention is needed for the soul, reason, and the heart. This is not a nostalgic or a decadent work. It is a muscular exercise against defeatism. The public and private realms are against each other like skin and endothelium. Pepón Osorio offers his reflections on wounds, feelings, ancestry, and immigrant communities. We must keep in mind, among the precedents, the work of Osorio's fellow Puerto Rican Antonio Martorell. If everything seems centered around the social, we must point out that there is no aesthetic confusion here; installation is not turned into something undefined, impersonal, blurry. On the contrary, the scene is traversed by a chilling sensation, everything is clean, organized, controlled —except for the passion of the voice that fills this show with emotional intensity.

Graciela Kartofel

Pepón Osorio. *My Beating Heart*, 2002. Mixed media. Courtesy: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Smith, Roberta. "Pepon Osorio." *The New York Times*, October 11, 2002, p. E38.

Pepón Osorio

Ronald Feldman Gallery
31 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through Oct. 19

"Face to Face," Pepón Osorio's latest site-specific transposition venture into the belly of the beast of bureaucracy, examines its human manifestations, aspirations and costs. Fittingly, the bureaucracy's focus is the family itself; the work was made during a yearlong residency at the Philadelphia Department of Human Services.

The setting is a bleak, meticulously recreated office where desks are veritable self-portraits, festooned with family snapshots and memorabilia. Mr. Osorio exaggerates this folk-artish practice to shrine status by adding ceramic figures, action heroes and snow globes that sharpen the awareness of social and racial stereotyping (our own included). Silent images of distressed children flicker like ghosts on the computer screens.

A huge cage stores the belongings of a real family in the "process of transition," including a monitor playing a home video of a boy's first birthday, which is festive yet subtly distressing. Finally, the audio portion: a tape of a not-too-promising counseling session between a caseworker and a mother worried about her fatherless son, an emotionally cut-off teenager who is about to become a father himself.

Like Mr. Osorio's best works, "Face to Face" achieves a kind of total immersion. It favors the documentary over the decorative, which is new for him and less visually satisfying, and it raises questions about substituting the power of reality for that of art. Still, this piece is an enormous collage that weaves together different sites and stages of family life with an immediacy that is beyond documentary, literature or theater. It creates a saddening glimpse of life's complexity that is very hard to shake.

A second work, a giant piñatalike heart wired with the sound of the artist's heartbeat, attempts optimism, but it is no match.

ROBERTA SMITH

Indych, Anna. "Nuyorican Baroque:Pepon Osorio's Chucherias." *Art Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 72-83.

Anna Indych

Nuyorican Baroque: Pepón Osorio's *Chucherías*

Pepón Osorio's knick-knack–encrusted objects and installations represent a visually potent engagement with Puerto Rican popular culture on the mainland and, more specifically, are the products of the artist's own experiences living and working in the barrios of New York City. Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Osorio moved to New York in 1975 at the age of twenty. For the past fifteen years, he has been creating artwork marked by his signature style, a visual overload of tchotchkas, plastic toys, Puerto Rican flags, tourist and religious kitsch items, and products "made in Korea." His adoption of this kitsch aesthetic has prompted one critic to call his work "plastic heaven"[1] and one curator to title his 1991 retrospective at El Museo del Barrio in New York, "*con to' los hierros*"—a Puerto Rican expression loosely translated as "giving it all you've got." Disrupting normative distinctions of taste and high art, Osorio uses kitsch to engage with the complicated formation of lower- and middle-class Puerto Rican identity and to forge a self-conscious strategy of cultural resistance.

In his book *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, Gillo Dorfles attempts to define the etymology of the word kitsch:

> *Certain writers claim that the word derives from the English 'sketch' while others attribute it to the German verb* etwas verkitschen *(knock off cheaply). Giesz attributes it to* kitschen, *meaning* den Strassen-schlamm zusammenscharren, *literally to 'collect rubbish from the street' which in effect is the interpretation closest to the concept of artistic rubbish and might be linked to the term junk art. The latter term has been used by English and American writers for a certain type of art which makes use of refuse taken bodily from the rubbish dump.*[2]

Other scholars claim that the word kitsch is rooted in a particular seventeenth-century baroque style of architecture. And in the twentieth century, intellectuals have most often used the term to define popular culture as bad taste. For Clement Greenberg, writing in 1939, kitsch represented the encroachment of the culture of the masses into high art. For the elite, kitsch is that which is false or inauthentic, that which becomes the simulacrum or a cheap knock-off.

But kitsch has also taken on different meanings over time, place, and context, and each manifestation involves the adoption of a different sign system and a different set of significations based on individual social and historical circumstances. While all kitsch stems from the heightened visibility of class differences, Latin American and Latino kitsch is historically and politically distinctive vis-à-vis the added layer of centuries of colonialism. Some writers trace a history of Latin American kitsch back to the colonial encounter of indigenous craftsmen with European masters. The intricate new style characterized by gilded surfaces, veneer inlays, cutout designs, and distinctively hybrid ornate objects created by mestizo artists in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New Spain is often seen as the historical precedent to a contemporary notion of kitsch in Latin American countries.[3]

Latin American and Latino artists have engaged with various kitsch aesthetics, each indicative of distinct historical circumstances and cultural practices. As Coco Fusco has maintained, "nearly every Latin American culture has

1. Joan Ross Acocella, "Plastic Heaven," *Artforum* 30 (January 1992): 64–67.
2. Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1975), 4.
3. Arlene Raven, "Pulling Out All the Stops," *Village Voice*, June 4, 1991, 108.

one or many terms to describe what in the Euro-American context is called kitsch"; *cursi* and *naco* are examples of two such terms. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has written on the subject of *rasquachismo*—the Chicano form of kitsch.[4] Like its Puerto Rican counterpart, *rasquachismo* springs from an underclass immigrant culture, yet maintains certain roots in the homeland. Both are hybrid constructions, the result of culture clash in this country, and both are also concerned with similar ends—the disruption of codes and the blurring of distinctions. But each signifies in different ways and results in a slightly different accumulation of elements. *Rasquachismo*, for example, seems to be rooted in more native traditions and places more emphasis on the handmade and the folk, while Puerto Rican kitsch tends to embrace the imported, the plastic, the mass-produced, and the industrial. Examples of Chicano *rasquachismo* as a spontaneous cultural form are the many altars or *ofrendas* created by the Mexican community for Day of the Dead celebrations. The installation work of Amalia Mesa-Bains is exemplary of artists who engage with this tendency.

Various versions of kitsch practices and aesthetics can also be identified in Cuba. With the island's status as a U.S. playground and vacation spot in the 1950s, "a certain carnival kitsch," as Osvaldo Sanchez termed it, evolved in conjunction with the spectacle of the nightclubs.[5] Prerevolutionary Cuba became the mythic setting for a violent desire to become other, a feat achieved in fabulous nightclubs like the Tropicana. The bad taste encompassed by the carnivalesque, Las Vegas–style exhibitionism in Havana, however, had more to do with U.S. projections and desires than with Cuban realities. In Cuba, the word used most often to refer to bad taste is *picúo*. But this term seems to be less pejorative than other incarnations. Linked with romantic nostalgia and the memory of prerevolutionary times, it is not only often used more affectionately, but seems to describe a popular, rather than mass-produced, aesthetic.

Luis Camnitzer has explored what he calls the kitsch stream in Cuban art of the 1980s.[6] These artists, however, tend toward a more conceptual treatment of kitsch, as is evidenced by the work of Flavio Garciandía and Arturo Cuenca. In his series, *The Catalogue of Bad Forms* (1982), Garciandía approaches theoretical issues of popular taste as they relate to the art market, while Cuenca's use of kitsch is the result of a longstanding interest in perception and cognition.[7]

In her book *Megalopolis*, Celeste Olalquiaga suggests that "the habit of simultaneously processing different cultures in Latin America anticipated postmodern pastiche and recycling to the point where it could be affirmed that Latin American culture, like most postcolonial or marginalized cultures, was in some ways postmodern before the First World, a pre-postmodernity, so to speak."[8] The desire to ascribe a logic of origins is a result of Olalquiaga's attempt to recuperate what dominant culture describes as a primitive or naïve cultural trait. But her suggestion of an *avant la lettre* postmodernity in Latin America still defines marginalized culture according to First World paradigms and results in a transhistorical characterization. In addition, her intellectualization of certain aesthetic practices, such as kitsch, forces them into elite notions of parodic distance. As such, kitsch is formulated as a cool intellectual distancing mechanism, a strategy not often put to use in real lived experience. (In

4. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *CARA: Chicano Art, Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1991), 155–62.
5. Osvaldo Sanchez, "Kitsch Carnival: Havana en los cincuentas," *Poliester* 2 (Summer 1992): 72–74.
6. Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 15.
7. Ibid., 202.
8. Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 83–84.

other words, Olalquiaga is optimistic about the radical potential of some uses of kitsch in Latin America. While I would acknowledge those same practices of resistance, one must be careful not to overtheorize and overdetermine their potential.) Nonetheless, her discussion of the particular political strategies behind the adoption of a kitsch aesthetic is particularly useful.

It is within the emergence of a hybrid culture that certain baroque patterns of excessive decoration become characteristic of contemporary urban practices. The ersatz aesthetic associated with Puerto Rican popular culture in New York can be seen as one of many responses to imposed culture, as well as the result of the need to forge a new identity in light of cultural and political marginalization. Exaggeration, hyperbole, and over-the-top embellishment with *chucherías* result not only in the adoption of what is normatively described as "bad" taste, but a spectacular delight in that disdained aesthetic. The excessive use of cheap plaster sculptures, for example, embodies the reworking of the codes of an imposed culture. Beyond disrupting notions of good taste, plaster sculptures as appropriations and reappropriations of masterpieces provide access to high culture otherwise denied. Celebration of the mass-produced item destabilizes categories previously thought to be steadfast and, in this sense, can be seen as a kind of resistance to or negotiation of imposed culture. The boundaries of high/low or fine art/mass reproduction do not only become slippery, but irrelevant.

Nuyorican kitsch, however, is best exemplified by the conflict between traditional and contemporary life. Often infused with a sense of personal memory, history, and nostalgia for the island, it adopts the visual and iconic qualities of Caribbean decoration. The vernacular of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience, one marked by dislocation, migration, and the constant possibility of returning, is particularly informative of urban realities. The elaboration of a familiar aesthetic (no matter how far removed) formulates one mechanism of distancing one's alien self from these global realities. The status of Puerto Ricans as part of the urban underclass of New York also highlights strategies of postindustrial pastiche as acts of subversion.[9] In an otherwise unyielding technological cityscape, saturation and excess afford a certain amount of visibility, or self-imaging, in a society where their image is determined from above or from the outside.

These aspects are not meant to be read as immutable constructs. As Coco Fusco has indicated, "the high cultural appreciation of kitsch often imputes naiveté to the original user or producer."[10] I, on the other hand, wish to stress how kitsch is often deployed as a self-conscious gesture of cultural resistance. I also wish to emphasize the need to make distinctions between various manifestations of kitsch—especially the differences between its appearance in artistic practice and in everyday life. Cultural kitsch and kitsch appropriated for artistic use each serve different functions. The dynamic between cultural kitsch and artistic kitsch is embodied in Osorio's own position, which straddles the worlds of community activism and artistic production, and is also represented by his works, which are rooted in the community, but are often displayed in mainstream art institutions.

Osorio moved to New York in the wake of Minimalism and Conceptualism, two movements defined by their "less is more" sensibility. After receiving

9. Ibid., 80–86.
10. Coco Fusco, "Vernacular Memories," *Art in America* (December 1991): 100. Reprinted in Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 89–95.

a bachelor's degree in sociology from Lehman College in the Bronx and a master's degree in art education from Teacher's College, Columbia University, he began to work primarily with Latino communities as a social worker for the child abuse prevention unit of the Human Resources Administration in New York. His experience as a social worker would lay the foundation for his later artistic collaborations with Puerto Rican/Latino communities.

Pepón Osorio. *La bicicleta* (The Bicycle), 1985. Mixed media. 39 x 24 x 60 in. (99 x 60 x 152.4 cm). Photo courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

In 1985 Osorio's artistic work shifted from a universalist style of abstract painting to his trademark *embelequero* approach. It is often repeated in the literature that his adoption of this visual idiom was precipitated by his encounters with the Nuyorican community.[11] In addition to creating sculptures and installations based on Caribbean popular culture, he also forged a career as a stage set designer and performer. Crossing various genres and employing a multimedia approach, he formed Pepatian, a partnership with his wife, the choreographer Merián Soto. Many of the early ornamental objects he created were used first in their performances, which have their roots in Caribbean music, dance, popular art, and street carnivals.

La bicicleta (The Bicycle, 1985) is one of the first works Osorio created in his newly acquired visual language. In the catalogue for his retrospective at El Museo del Barrio, Susana Torruella Leval describes *La bicicleta* as a nostalgic tribute to Osorio's childhood in Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 1960s, where he witnessed street vendors, knife grinders, and other peddlers who decorated their vehicles in their own personal style.[12] He covered this bicycle with ribbons, flowers, plastic swans and palm trees, Kewpie dolls, a crucifix, a Chiclets box, beads, and pieces of reflective metallic tape. The decoration is so excessive that it renders the object impractical as a means of transportation; it is transformed into a personal shrine that is meant to be hung high from the ceiling. (Hanging from the ceiling can also refer to the necessity of finding alternative or creative storage devices in cramped urban apartments.)

In *La cama* (The Bed, 1987), Osorio uses the formal device of the bed to weave a personal narrative paying homage to two important women in his life: Juana Hernández, the black nanny who raised him and died in 1982, and Merián Soto, whom he married the same year he created the work. *La cama* is a lavishly decorated four-poster bed, with a bedspread made of hundreds of stitched *recuerdos* or *capias* (party favors given in Puerto Rico at special ritual celebrations, such as birthdays, weddings, and baptisms) and a pillow case covered with popular religious iconography. The bed, therefore, is the site of various rites of passage rooted in Osorio's childhood experiences in Puerto

11. Ibid., 91.
12. Susanna Torruella Leval, "Con To' Los Hierros," in *Con To' Los Hierros: A Retrospective of the Work of Pepón Osorio* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1991), 7.

Rico. The use of the *recuerdos*, a play on the other meaning of the word as "memory," serves a dual function as a decorative device and as a visual clue to the work's honorary nature. Leval, for example, describes Osorio's "vivid memories of sneaking into Juana's darkened room to rummage through the mysterious treasures in her dresser drawers: golden earrings, brightly colored baubles, pastel pearl necklaces, and strong smelling rouge."[13] In this sense, Osorio pays homage to the woman who partially inspired his method of working.

Pepón Osorio. *El Chandelier* (The Chandelier), 1988. Mixed media. 78 x 48 x 48 in. (198.1 x 121.9 cm). Photo courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

On the bed's headboard is a picture of Soto as a ballerina, and on the reverse of the sun medallion is a picture of Osorio himself as a child in his Sunday best. Along the baseboard of the room in which the bed is presented is an inscription, a handwritten testimonial based on a dream in which he approached Hernández on her deathbed and introduced her to Soto. *La cama*, therefore, is an intensely autobiographical work stressing and celebrating familial bonds in light of cultural displacement.

In 1988, Osorio created *El chandelier* (The Chandelier). A highly ornamented light fixture, it is covered with tassels, grass, dominoes, water guns, Saint Lazarus sculptures, plastic rhinos, giraffes, monkeys, and Puerto Rico's mascot—little frogs called *coquis*, after the sound they make. Joan Acocella gives a more precise description of this work of accumulated details:

> The light bulbs (the kind which are fake candle flames) are surrounded with little plastic palm trees and set in golden cups from which Kewpie dolls peep out, some in turbans, some in straw hats. On every perch there hover white [swans and] little brown ballerinas. From every arm of the chandelier plastic babies dangle, wrapped in white blankets and tied with ribbons, some pink, some blue. Looping from arm to arm are swags of pearls, cascades of fringe, and sticking out here and there—the pièce de résistance—are plastic fingernail extenders, disembodied fingertips with scarlet nails.[14]

Osorio was inspired to create this work after catching glimpses of ornate chandeliers inside apartments in housing projects in New York's Lower East Side. The chandeliers he encountered were self-fashioned creations of abundance in otherwise impoverished settings.

El Corolla Club (1989) similarly addresses the embellishment of scarce resources. Built from the windshield of a Toyota, the work is encrusted with air fresheners, plastic saint figures, tropical decals, images of Christ, and plastic spoons. Osorio has superimposed a photographic image behind the windshield, giving the impression of three-dimensional space. From behind the wheel, a

13. Ibid., 13.
14. Acocella, 64.

man stares out as a Puerto Rican flag hangs from the rearview mirror. The man, a homeless Puerto Rican Vietnam veteran, collaborated with Osorio by helping him reconstruct this fantasy environment.

Because possessing a car is highly valued, many people spend substantial time taking care of that prized commodity. But with this work, Osorio reconsiders the significance of this basically male ritual, which, as Leval has observed, serves to equate a car with male potency.[15] Through over-the-top decoration, excessive in its use of traditionally feminine details of pretty flowers and colors, Osorio offers a humorous parody of a highly gendered cultural practice. The tension between Puerto Rican masculinity and effeminate decoration will be an issue explored again in a later installation.

While Osorio's works tend to be visually seductive because of their elaborately decorated surfaces, they also reveal a harsher political message. As such, they reflect the cultural practice of using "ornament as a coping mechanism to the personal, economic and political violence that underlies it."[16] Kitsch becomes emblematic of a general fear of not having. As Arlene Raven writes, "To embellish for Puerto Ricans is to reinvent with what's there . . . people living in deprivation comfort themselves with icons of richness, a metaphorical richness."[17]

In conversation, Osorio has mentioned the phenomenon of hoarding and buying by millions on the island—a practice that began in the wake of a serious depression in the 1940s and 1950s after the sugar market crashed.[18] This practice, as he recounts, has become the reality of the material culture of the Puerto Rican middle class and has even extended to the mainland, when many Puerto Ricans overcompensated for what they lacked by hoarding commodities. In much of his work, Osorio uses the overabundance of collected objects to represent a general fear of not having—and the common phenomenon of aspiring to a higher class than one's own.

Since the mid-1980s, Osorio had engaged kitsch as a means of interrogating Puerto Rican identity and culture, working mostly with discrete objects. *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, created for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, was one of his first large multimedia installations and also marked his entrance into the mainstream art world. An interior that the artist has carefully crafted as a fanciful representation of a "typical" Puerto Rican home, this mythic domestic space is divided into two areas—living and dining rooms—both decorated in a hyperbolically gaudy style. The scene includes tacky red sateen curtains, a plastic-covered couch, goat horns, fake plants, plaster lawn statues of various saints and virgins, plaster wall mounts, a glittered mirror, numerous family photographs, chairs upholstered with the Puerto Rican flag, fake flowers, trophies, and wallpaper made from the covers of *TV Guides* and other magazines. The various lights and cameras also included signify an investigative crime scene.

The victim of the crime is a mannequin corpse lying face down, covered and roped off by police tape—a symbol of Osorio's larger concern with the problem of the representation of Puerto Ricans and their culture. Through the tossed and broken items of furniture in this domestic interior, we are led to believe that the victim is the body of a woman who has been murdered by her husband. But as the work's title suggests, the question remains as to whose

15. Leval, "Con To' Los Hierros," 15.
16. Donald Chant Bohn, "Fleisher Art Memorial," *New Art Examiner* 19 (April 1992): 29.
17. Raven, 108.
18. Author's interview with the artist, February 29, 1996.

crime this scene represents. The title also beckons the viewer to question her or his own readiness to jump to conclusions.

After taking the time to set up this flamboyant scene, Osorio undercuts his stereotypical representation. He refuses figurative representation of the body; instead, the "only access to the Latino body is through means of objects in the domestic space"[19]—that is, the family photographs, sentimental bric a brac, trophies, and dining chairs silkscreened with the images of their usual inhabitants. The viewer occupies a liminal position with respect to the scene, negotiating her or his space through the give and take of these objects. Certain elements are displayed for our benefit, while others are just hidden from our lines of sight. Visual and spatial access is denied through the use of gates and yellow police tape. The focus of the narrative, the corpse, remains in the background.

But the welcome mat in front reads, "Only if you can understand that it has taken years of pain to gather into our homes our most valuable possessions; but the greater pain is to see how in the movies others make fun of the way we live." This sentence alludes to the representation of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in U.S. culture. Its content is further buttressed by the columns of videotape boxes that literally bracket the installation. On these boxes, in which films that convey Latino stereotypes are packaged, Osorio placed statements by Latinos he interviewed regarding how they are affected by representations of themselves in Hollywood:[20]

> *We are either seen as violent, horny, or on welfare. They never show our humanity or our struggles and empowerment.*
>
> *You see the negative stereotypes portrayed in the movies so many times that at some point you start believing them yourself.*
>
> *The more I see the stereotypes the more I feel excluded from the world, almost as if I'm living a reality that is not common to others.*
>
> *You would expect that by now they would be more conscientious. We've grown, why can't they?*

Taking the form of a diorama or a historical tableau, the traditional mode of display in a natural history museum, the scene highlights the sense that we are witness to freaks on display. In this regard, the lights and cameras of the crime scene suggest a stage set, emphasizing the artifice and self-consciousness of representation the work is meant to suggest.

The development of Osorio's stereotypical *embelequero* aesthetic into a more narrative framework engendered a host of reactions. Most criticisms of the work were launched primarily by Latinos themselves. The most common reaction was one based on class assumptions: "Well, I didn't grow up that way." Osorio sees this as a very ingrained sense of "kitschophobia" on the part of Latinos—a tendency to hide and deny lower-class culture. This criticism reflects how his work is trapped in the contradiction of simultaneously embracing and fragmenting stereotypes. For all of his efforts to address community issues, in the end, does Osorio fall prey to associating Puerto Ricans with stereotypes of the criminalized poor? The vague line between celebration

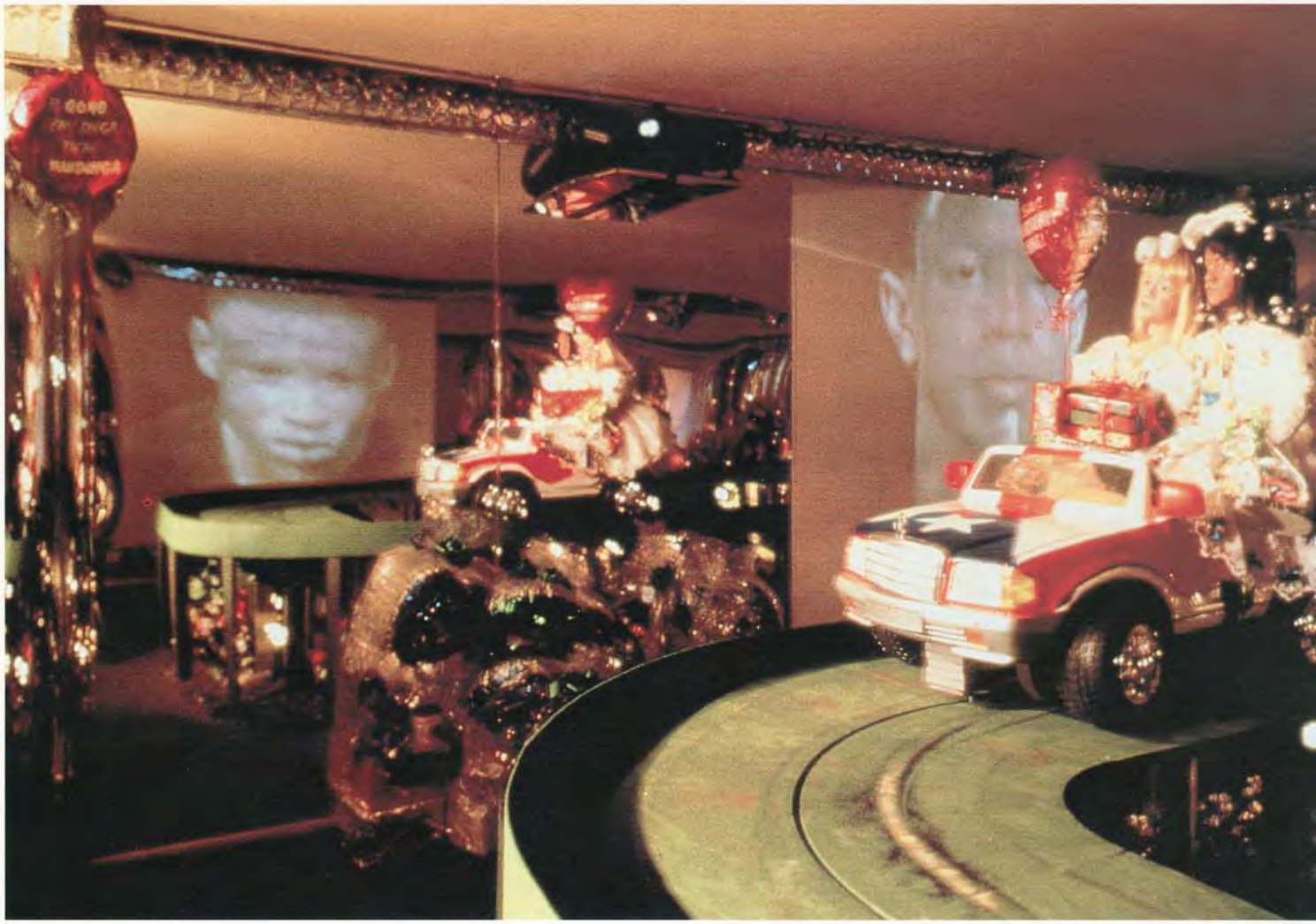
19. Tiffany Ana Lopez, "Imaging Community: Video in the Installation Work of Pepón Osorio," *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 58.
20. Ibid.

Pepón Osorio. *En la barbería no se llora* (No Crying Allowed in the Barber Shop), 1994. Installation at Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

and critique, which he often cleverly straddles, became muddled within the contested terrain of cultural representation at stake within the Whitney. Indeed, after the experience of presenting *Scene of the Crime* in this context, he decided not to show new work in mainstream museums until it had first been shown in the community. As Tiffany Ana López suggests, "This decision was influenced by his realization that though his contribution brought the museum's attention to the artistic cultural production of Puerto Ricans, it did not in and of itself bring Puerto Ricans into the museum. In other words the focus in his work on the Latino body did not necessarily guarantee the visibility of that social body."[21]

In 1994, Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut, commissioned Osorio to make a work for its Specifics Program, which he titled *En la barbería no se llora* (No Crying Allowed in the Barber Shop). In collaboration with members of the local Latino community, Osorio set up an installation in the Frog Hollow neighborhood, in an abandoned building that at one time had been a church and later a beauty shop. The installation was in the form of an actual barber shop like those found in Puerto Rico, and was decorated with a plethora of objects that engaged the cultural codification of normative gender roles in Puerto Rican and other Latino communities.

21. Ibid.



Pepón Osorio. *Las twines* (The Twin Girls), 1998. Mixed-media installation with motorized car and three video monitors. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo Tony Velez.

En la barbería no se llora is based on Osorio's memory of his first haircut at the age of five in a barbershop in Santurce, Puerto Rico. The barbershop, as Osorio remembers it, is a distinctly male space in the community, and having one's hair cut there is an integral rite of passage into masculinity. He remembers his first haircut as being a frightening experience in which his father admonished him not to cry.[22]

Through excessive and exaggerated decoration, Osorio establishes an overdetermined male space. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with male iconography, including portraits of Latin American and Latino men, such as Fidel Castro, Roberto Clemente, and Rubén Blades. The largest portrait, placed prominently in the center of one wall, is a framed image of Benjamin Osorio, the artist's father. This Latino Hall of Fame serves two paradoxical functions: it counters stereotypical representations of Latino men in the media, while its disturbingly excessive display of masculinity almost collapses under the weight of its rigid and defined gender roles. This parodic stance is embellished by other details of the lavish decor: old car seats serve as waiting area chairs, and the barber chairs themselves are covered with baseballs, miniature cars, male action figures, and Puerto Rican flags. This male imagery works in

22. Ibid., 60.

combination with traditionally feminine adornment: plastic flowers, lace doilies, flowered wall paper, and various beauty products. By melding various histories of ornament with the broader question of Latino identity, Osorio not only uses kitsch as a tool to deconstruct normative gender roles, but questions the gendered codes of kitsch itself.

Continuing his strategic practice of both creating and displaying his installations in a community context before they enter an art institution, Osorio developed *Las twines* (The Twin Girls) in 1998. The project, an exploration of the dynamic of internalized racism, was a collaboration among three Bronx-based organizations: Pepatian, Unitas, and the Hostos Center for Art and Culture. After the work was first shown in a community storefront in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the South Bronx, and then at the Hostos Center for Art and Culture, it was displayed in the Soho gallery, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Confronting racism within Latino communities, the work is inspired by a legend about a pair of twins—one dark, the other fair-skinned—who travel the world side by side receiving gifts but are unable to find their father. Doll-like sculptural figures of two young girls in white communion dresses are seated in a red car that rides around a lavishly ornamented room on a raised oval track. The twin sisters, identical except for their different skin color and hair texture, circle repeatedly around a labyrinth of fun house mirrors and gaudy party decorations. In addition, on each wall is projected the face of a different man, each engaged in washing a different skin color from his face while a sound track projects the voices of the two girls calling for "Papá." The confluence of rituals—religious confirmation, a family party, and a rite of passage—embellishes the theme of the search for origins in light of inculcated racism and is, in turn, magnified by the over-the-top, ritualistic decoration.

The girls, decorated with ribbons, party favors, and cheap plastic jewelry, are doomed to this liminal world of a home party blown out of proportions. Like other installations by Osorio, which also propose disturbing narratives, baroque decoration is used in *Las twines* for maximum theatrical effect. The exaggerated ornamentation takes on a distinctly scary element, however, projecting a sensation similar to that experienced by young children who are afraid of clowns. The party decorations, meant to signal a happy affair, instead elicit an eerie atmosphere filled with dread as the mannequin-girls remain forever glued in their party dresses in this horror show.

The ambiguity of Osorio's works allows them to encompass simultaneously celebratory and critical perspectives on kitsch as a defining cultural trait of Latinos. One is often left wondering if these works construct a monolithic Puerto Rican lower-class subject and if the adoption of a kitsch aesthetic is really one of the fundamental elements of being Puerto Rican. While Osorio states that he is embracing contradictions, one might say that he is employing what Gayatri Spivak has termed "strategic essentialism": a critical position validating identity as politically necessary, but not as immutable or ahistorical. In this manner, he uses stereotypical imagery to underscore social and political realities. Perhaps it is our unwillingness to accept or acknowledge those realities that is the source of anxiety surrounding the work.

In the late 1990s, as these questions were being debated, Osorio turned to a new community and a new visual device. Inverting his strategy, he covered

Pepón Osorio. *State of Preservation*, 1996. China, shrink wrap, cloth. Figurine sizes ca. 6 x 3 x 3 in. (15.2 x 7.6 cm). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo John Lamka.

the entire contents of the house of an upper-class white family in Santa Barbara, California, with clear plastic for an installation entitled *State of Preservation*. Through this action, he evoked the common, lower-to-middle-class domestic practice of protecting furniture with plastic covers and cleverly imposed the social realities of kitsch—those plastic covers safeguard precious objects not easily replaced by lower-income families—onto a distinct social group. Plastic, here, no longer served a protective function but, in fact, was an impediment, a barrier that prevented the family from living in its own space. The family, then, was forced to confront class distinctions in a viscerally physical manner, their house and their lives entombed by a material and decorating device foreign to such homes, yet so prevalent in Latino and ethnic communities. In this way, Osorio, too, broadens his usual subject—Latino, specifically Puerto Rican, cultural identity—to engage a more universal high/low dialectic. The work marked a change in Osorio's trademark tchotchka-filled aesthetic, yet still invoked it through absence. While the plastic took on the minimal look of clear glass, its excess and exaggeration still spoke to concerns ever-present in his work. His formal strategy, a fear of emptiness, mirrors kitsch's social implications: the fear of not having. Through his humorous, ironic, and critical use of kitsch, as well as his work with different local communities, Osorio negotiates stereotypes between outside perceptions of Latino culture and real lived experience.[23]

23. Osorio's works, including *En la barbería no se llora* and *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, were recently exhibited for the first time in Puerto Rico in a major exhibition spanning four institutions. *Pepón Osorio: De Puerta en Puerta/Pepón Osorio: Door to Door* was on view September 1, 2000–January 15, 2001 at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico; Museo de San Juan, Municipio de San Juan; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico; and Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. A catalogue with essays by Marimar Benitez and others accompanies the exhibition.

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Jefferson, Margo. "When Nothing Gets Between the Art and Its Viewer." *The New York Times,* October 14, 1999, p. E2.

REVISIONS

Margo Jefferson

When Nothing Gets Between the Art and Its Viewer

Imagine two big orange cats nearly five feet high sitting on a long wooden table covered by a white embroidered cloth. Their eyes are a lurid blue, and they look, as cats often do, both mysterious and smug. They are linked by a golden chain, and around the neck of each is a golden oval brooch with an inscription. "Fear," reads one. The other reads, "Denial."

This is no entrance to the underworld they are guarding: we have entered the kingdom of ordinary human life, which has as many kinds of fear and denial as the hells of yesteryear had demons and punishments. Fear and denial are movable feasts.

Maybe these animals should be guarding the entrance to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where the exhibition "Sensation" has been shrouded in hypocrisy, cowardice and more than one kind of political cynicism. But rather, you will find them sitting [illegible]efully if implacably in a small room at the Ronald Feldman gallery on Mercer Street. "Fear and Denial" is the work of the wonderful artist Pepón Osorio (he received a MacArthur grant this year) and is one of two works that have taken over this gallery space.

The cats dominate the second room, but the installation "Las Twinas" — what a dull word, "installation"; in this case I'd call it a habitation — turns the first into another world altogether.

That's the thing about this kind of art (installation, habitation, site-specific). When it works, there is nothing between you the viewer and your responses to what surrounds you. Oddly enough, it's an experience more akin to reading a book than to what so often happens when you go art viewing, especially on a busy day.

You can be on your own sensory and mental schedule; you can stand still and look around slowly, speed through once and then test what you took in and start obsessing on details. Go away and come back to something that didn't register the first time around, daydream and allow yourself to be overcome (within behavioral limits, naturally). Even if [illegible]e are lots of other people, you [illegible]reer to navigate your way around. A three-dimensional space in which everything counts doesn't impose, or politely yet firmly suggest, what viewing order is most appropriate.

To enter Mr. Osorio's creation is to begin by reading a story: a legend, a mournful household tale, a story of natural events and supernatural longings. Here are the first words you see, printed on the gallery's white entrance wall:

"Once upon a time, not far away or long ago, there lived for many years twin sisters. Adopted at birth after the death of their mother, they lived in fear that one day they would be separated forever. Because of this they vowed to each other always to remain together and to find their natural father. No one remembers their original names. They were known as 'Las Twinas.' While they were identical in every way, one thing that distinguished them was their skin color. For over 50 years the sisters crossed the seven seas, traveled the seven continents and spent all their days and nights in search of the truth. Everywhere they went they were showered with gifts, for people saw a bit of themselves in Las Twinas' story. Their father never dared to claim responsibility for their existence. People say that even today you can hear them in the early morning hours walking through the streets and calling for Papa."

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

"Fear and Denial," part of an installation art show by Pepón Osorio.

Metaphors and layers of meaning in a tale of twins.

Then we enter the land of Mr. Osorio and his twins. The first thing we see in the room's center is a railroad track. Two little girls with perfect posture sit in an automobile that circles around and around on the track. Those ruffled white dresses with full, beautifully ironed skirts; the little pocketbooks on their wrists, the white bows (the kind you decorate Christmas presents with) on top of their heads, accentuating the well-trimmed bangs: what father wouldn't be proud to claim them? True, one is pink skinned and blond (her hair curls up in a gentle flip), and the other is a brown skinned and dark haired (she wears braids accessorized with white plastic bubbles).

This is Puerto Rico, after all, where one can be black, brown, beige, cream or porcelain, and where any combination can show up in the same family. As a friend of mine once observed, about the similarly mixed families we knew in our own United States, "Negro genes work in mysterious ways." And Puerto Rico lies beneath the railroad tracks, enclosed in a garland of green plastic leaves, filled with plants, trees and flowers, marked by street lamps and bowls with small map paperweights at their bottoms.

The gifts showered on Las Twinas are in four corners of the room, baskets filled with b[illegible]loons and hair clips, fans, dolls, small statues of different colors and balloons with slogans, jokes and taunts in English and Spanish.

The four walls of the room are mirrored. On each, at different intervals and at different speeds (all slowly, though), appear the faces of three men. You keep looking around. They all have dark brown faces. No, one, now two of them are washing off that dark brown skin; here is a white face with blue eyes, and here's a light brown face. Now the third man, the one with the darkest skin, and with full features, is applying his white skin.

The colors make the men look as if they have tribal markings, or as if they might have vitiligo. Perhaps they are simply treating identity like a beauty regimen, applying, rinsing off, leaving bare, then reappplying their racial makeup. "Is it too obvious?" asked someone I was describing it to. No, I answered, because it can mean so many things. Some are purely literal and historical; some are psychological. Not to mention metaphorical and metaphysical.

Have I described the aural counterpoint to this manly ritual? It is the sound of the little girls' voices, sometimes separately, sometimes in unison, sometimes a beat or half-beat apart, calling out, "Papa, Papa." Each man shakes his head slowly, even regretfully it seems. But no, comes the silent answer. Not me. Those children are not mine.

This is the horror of a parent casting you out, turning his back because you remind him of something that repels or shames him, willing to live without you when some part of you can never live without him. Motherless children, the song says, feel a long way from home. Fatherless children aren't really sure where home is.

Duran, Estella. "An Artist Whose Creations Live Out Among the People." *The New York Times*, July 22, 1999.

An Artist Whose Creations Live Out Among the People

By ESTELLA DURÁN

Pepón Osorio, who was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award last month, has had his art displayed in the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American Art. But to take in his latest mixed-media installation, you have to head up to the Young World Store on Third Avenue in East Harlem and look between the racks marked "Girls 4 to 6X" and "Toddler Girls 2 to 4T."

Shoppers and art lovers there have been greeted by "Transboricua," a work that centers on a combative-looking figure with boxing gloves, a backpack and a Puerto Rican-style hat called a pava. A chain-link fence surrounds him. The man — Mr. Osorio refers to him as a mutant — is decked in symbols of assorted Latin American countries (a Mexican flag covers his face); photo buttons of children with their eyes closed; tiny, hand-beaded Puerto Rican flags, and cloth patches depicting cartoonish eyes.

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Pepón Osorio is equally at home in the art world and in Latino neighborhoods.

This may not be the usual stuff of clothing stores, but for Mr. Osorio the collision between conceptual art and everyday life is normal.

In "El Cab," a 1997 memorial to a murdered livery cab driver, Sergio Jimenez, he decorated seven taxis that cruised the streets for about a month. Last year he placed "Las Twines" ("The Twins"), an installation employing video and sculpture, in a vacant storefront at Southern Boulevard and Tiffany Street in the South Bronx. The video digitally duplicated and darkened the image of a 9-year-old girl. The result — twin sisters, one light and one dark — addresses issues of racism and identity.

José Ramírez, who owns a nearby barber shop, said that seeing the piece taught people "a lot about humanity, that there should be harmony among the races because color doesn't matter."

Mr. Osorio says he is equally at home in the art world and in Latino neighborhoods. "My art is for people who go to museums and for people who don't go to museums," he said. "It's an old notion that people go to the museum. It should really be the museum going to the people."

Mr. Osorio, 44, who stands 6 feet 2 and has

Continued on Page 6

Art That Lives Out Among the People

Continued From First Arts Page

a thick black mustache, was born to a middle-class family in Santurce, P.R. In 1975 he moved to the South Bronx, where he was a social worker. He maintains a studio there but moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan about three years ago.

He was a co-founder in 1983 of the dance company Pepatian with his wife of 12 years, Merian Soto, and Patti Bradshaw, who are both choreographers. Mr. Osorio has built sets for the group's performances. Increasingly, though, he has focused on his installations. Before making his artworks, he often conducts interviews, talking to a wide range of people in tertulias (small town meetings), sometimes in people's homes. He is easy to talk to, open and friendly, with unfaltering politeness and expressive mannerisms.

This work brought him to the attention of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which this year named him one of 32 fellows and awarded him a $315,000 prize.

"He's one of the artists who are appreciated in the museum setting but whose works are created out of the community and for the community," said Amalia Mesa-Bains, a California installation artist who has exhibited with him. "The art world tends to divide artists into those who make objects related to the museums and to the market, and those whose work appears in the community. But Pepón challenges those false categories."

New York has a long history of public art, from 19th-century cemeteries to contemporary works sprinkled around the city. But recent efforts have not always been welcomed by the neighborhoods that received them. In one of the most pronounced cases, Richard Serra's sculpture "Tilted Arc," outside 26 Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan, was removed in 1989 after Government workers in the building complained about the piece.

Mr. Osorio's works are often embraced by neighborhood residents before they reach established art institutions.

His art, which frequently deals with racism against and among Latinos, "pushes the boundaries to an extent that is unusual even in New York, where the experimentation level is very high," said Susana Torruella Leval, director of El Museo del Barrio in Harlem.

His complex installations, mixed-media works that can fill several rooms, are crammed with colorful detail. "Transboricua," his first exhibition in a store, is on display until Sunday in the Young World Store at 1915 Third Avenue, as part of El Museo del Barrio's "1999 Site/Studio/Street Festival," which is taking place while the museum undergoes renovations.

Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Pepón Osorio installing "Transboricua" at the Young World Store.

The piece was commissioned by the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art and the Providence Public Library. After it leaves the store, it will be featured from Sept. 23 to Jan. 9 at El Museo del Barrio, at 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street.

"Las Twines" and Mr. Osorio's "Fear and Denial" will be on display from Sept. 8 to Oct. 9 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., a gallery at 31 Mercer Street in SoHo.

Mr. Osorio is also represented in New York by a re-creation of one of his most powerful pieces, "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)," which appeared in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and fills several rooms with video, found objects and religious icons. The piece, which comments on the negative portrayals of Latinos by Hollywood, is featured in the exhibition "Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960's," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts until Sept. 5. It will become part of the museum's permanent collection.

"Transboricua" combines the words "transformation" and "Boricua," the name for Puerto Rico in its native Taino Indian language. Mr. Osorio said that "Transboricua" addressed issues of consumerism and the transformations that Puerto Ricans and Latin American immigrants undergo as they adapt to living with one another in New York.

"We go into a transition and cultural negotiations with other groups," he said. "What was once El Barrio is now shifting to a different cultural representation."

Referring to the fence in the installation, he said it "represents the walls people put up to guard their territory, their identity."

"But I want people to be able to experience the work up close, too, and to feel a sense of ownership of it," he added. He is distributing 100 keys to allow community residents inside the fence to see the figure.

Many customers at Young World said that they were puzzled at first by "Transboricua" but that they appreciated its message. They seemed to connect with what was most accessible.

"It's good to see the different cultures represented, and the kids can learn from this," said Janet Rivera, 34, who is Puerto Rican and lives in East Harlem, as her four children watched a video that is part of the installation.

Rita Alonzo, 33, a Mexican-American resident of East Harlem, said, "It's nice to see the Mexican flag and the other Latin American flags together, because the different cultures don't always get along."

Mr. Osorio accepts that the different layers of his work might be hard to perceive and interpret at first. "If people don't understand the work right away, that is not as important as getting them to think and talk about things like racism and identity," he said.

There is a good deal of humor in Mr. Osorio's pieces, but he is more concerned with raising issues for public discussion. He is planning a video work called "Home Visits," which will be mailed to people across the country, starting in the Bronx.

"I want people to invite their friends over and have openings in their own homes," he said. "It's all about accessibility and finding how people will care for this work."

Cotter, Holland. "Pepon Osoriio 'Transboricua'" *The New York Times*, July 16, 1999.

ART IN REVIEW

Pepón Osorio
'Transboricua'

Youngworld Children's Department Store
1915 Third Avenue, at 106th Street
East Harlem
Through July 25

A few years ago, Pepón Osorio's installation "Badge of Honor" made its debut in a storefront in a working class neighborhood in Newark. The piece, based on a video dialogue between a Latino boy and his imprisoned father, later appeared at Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo and elsewhere. But the resonance it generated in its original setting was extraordinary.

Work by Mr. Osorio, who recently won a MacArthur grant and who participated in the 1993 Whitney biennial, often travels this route from the real world to the art world. "Transboricua" is the latest example of that process.

Created for a public library in Providence, R.I., and now installed in Youngworld Children's Department Store in East Harlem, the piece looks more streamlined than some of Mr. Osorio's previous installations — the amazing "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)" now installed at the Bronx Museum of the Arts is an example — but it is loaded with eye-catching symbolic detail.

It starts with a huge cage of cyclone fencing set amid the store's racks of bright "Hot Summer Fun" clothes. A mannequinlike figure is locked inside: a man wearing a dark suit, a broad-brimmed hat, a small backpack and boxing gloves, his face entirely swathed in patterned cloth. He stands on pink clay patio tiles surrounded by green plastic ground cover. A microphone is in front of him, and a stuffed peacock is nearby.

Every aspect of the piece is coded with meaning. The cage suggests both confinement and protection; the backpack is a sign of someone on the move. The man's glitter-covered hat carries the Puerto Rican national emblem, his face is covered by a Mexican flag and his boxing gloves are emblazoned with the official insignia of the Dominican Republic. He looks imposing and combative, but the music he appears to sing into the microphone (it is actually piped in from elsewhere) is a 1940's Puerto Rican lament about a man returning empty-handed from a long and arduous journey.

The dozens of cartoon eyes sewn to the man's suit echo the patterns on the tail of the peacock, and the motif is picked up in dozens of photographic pins, each carrying the portrait of a child. Before the pictures were taken, Mr. Osorio had asked the children to imagine what they might look like 50 years in the future, and they faced the camera with eyes closed, as if they were lost in thought. A single pair of eyes appears on a little video implanted in the man's backpack. Their pupils take the form of a world globe.

Installed under the direction of the curator Julia P. Herzberg, "Transboricua" is about many things. The title implies the idea of transition or transformation, one directly pertinent to the East Harlem setting: the barrio, once largely Puerto Rican, is now home to other Latino populations, a mix that has produced territorial tensions.

As Ms. Herzberg points out in a flyer, the piece also addresses a broader picture. Despite a history of poverty, America's Hispanic population does its share to keep a double-edged consumerist economy afloat. (Youngworld is evidence of that.) But that economy is reducing ethnic diversity to a global culture in which everyone is, to some degree, spiritually homeless.

Mr. Osorio manages to imbed all of this into his installation without making a big deal of any of it, and, most important, without sacrificing visual flair. And "Transboricua" will make its leap out of the community into the art world next fall. It will be installed in the Museo del Barrio on Fifth Avenue at 104th Street in September, where it will take on another, different, though surely no less dynamic life.

HOLLAND COTTER

Nassau, Lawrence. "Las Twines, Pepon Osorio." *NY Arts*, no. 25 (October 1998): 11.

Las Twines, Pepón Osorio

The Latino identity is increasingly becoming a subject of discussion within both the Latino community and the arts-at-large. While it's common to hear questions raised about the role of the racial make-up of the populace of Brazil or Cuba, it is rarer to find an open and frank discussion about the racial origins of the Puerto Rican people, especially of those residing in the 50 states of the USA and the District of Columbia. In order to open a dialogue on the matter, Pepón Osorio has created a gently provocative installation piece, titled *Las Twines*.

In *Las Twines*, or *The Twin Girls*, Osorio addresses the co-existence of the Spanish colonialist, African slave, and native Boricua bloodlines within the Puerto Rican population. At the center of the work is a pair of mannequins of young twin girls, who appear to be identical in all features except for skin color; one is fair-skinned, and the other is dark-skinned. They are dressed as parade princesses and seated in the type of car which tends to appear in cultural pride parades in New York City. On the periphery of the installation, there are three projection videos, each depicting a close-up view of a man washing his face with water and, as a result, transforming his skin color from light to dark and back and his features from "African" to "European" and back. The third component of Las Twines consists of bundles of festive mylar balloons with imprinted phrases commenting on racial origin.

Osorio generally presents each of his works initially within a local community venue and, afterwards, within an institutional art exhibition facility. In mid-August, he installed Las Twines in a storefront space in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, an area which Osorio has noted is not only 79% Latino and 18% African-American but also 41% under the age of 19. By bringing this work to a neighborhood populated by so many young children and teenagers, Osorio demonstrates how an artist can support the initiatives of community-based, youth-oriented social service and educational programs, such as, respectively, Unitas and Pepatian.

Las Twines will travel to the Hostos Center for Arts & Culture in late October. It is difficult to say whether or how the work will seem to be re-contextualized in a university environment. However, it will be interesting to see if or how the student community will be impacted by this refreshing and mildly controversial work.

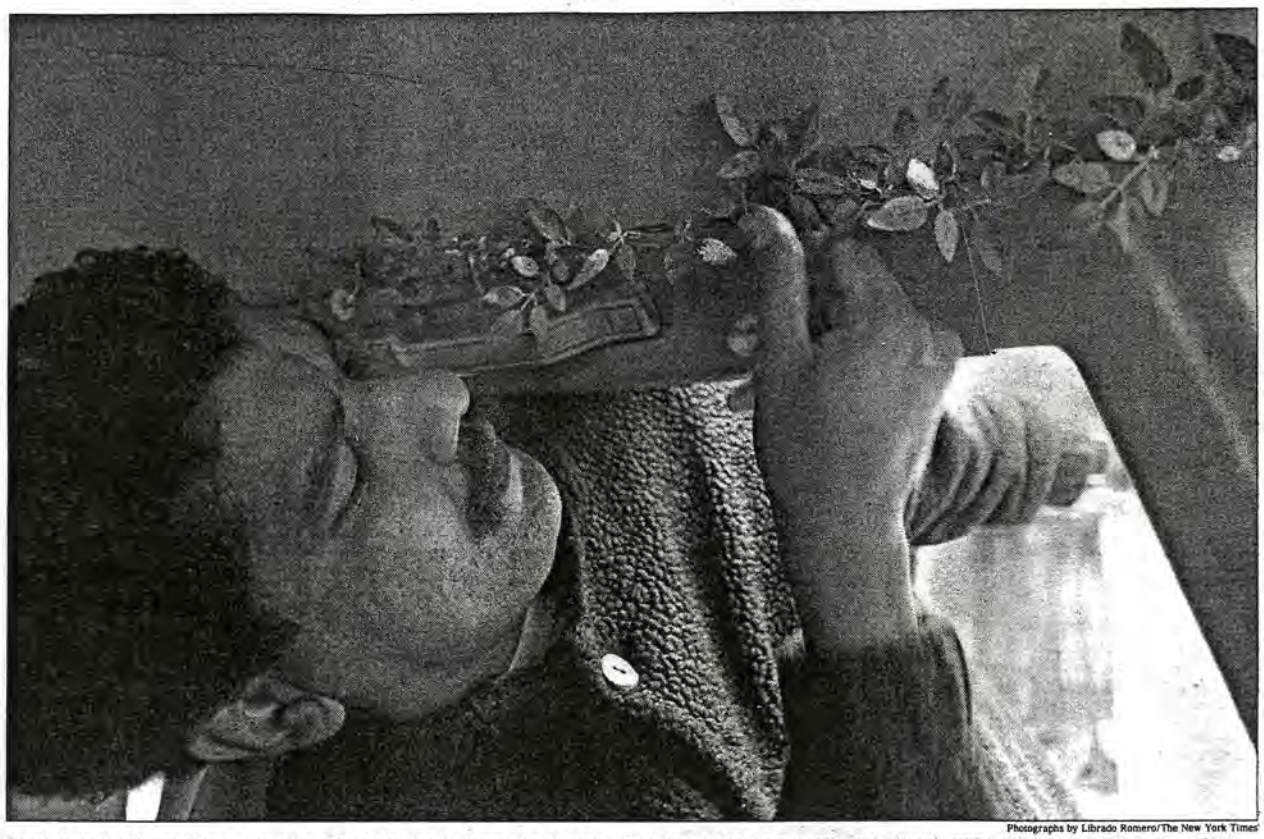
--Lawrence Nassau

Las Twines, Pepón Osorio
August 10 -15, 1998
Las Twines Storefront,
886 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, New York

October 21,1998
The Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College,
450 Grand Concourse, Bronx, New York.
Tel. (718) 518-6540

Wallach, Amei. "Roving Taxis With a Message Told Through Art." *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 16, 1997. p. H-40.

Roving Taxis With a Message Told Through Art



Photographs by Librado Romero/The New York Times

Pepón Osorio, a Puerto Rican-born artist, places a garland of leaves inside a taxi—The installation is a metaphorical mirror in which riders can look into themselves.

By AMEI WALLACH

THE ARTIST PEPÓN OSORIO looks like just the sort of man cabdrivers think twice about picking up on the street. His skin is dark and pitted, his mustache militant, his forehead low; he stands a thickly packed 6 feet 2 inches tall.

He has been left stranded by cabbies so often, in fact, that when he began to work with Dominican livery drivers to prepare a memorial to one of their murdered colleagues, the piece became as much about the way even his own Latino community rejects his dark-skinned kind as about the driver's life and the effects of his death.

For "El Cab," as the work is called, Mr. Osorio, who was born in Puerto Rico, has transformed seven owner-operated radio-dispatch cars into traveling installations that for the next month will carry art to anyone who calls Mega Radio Dispatcher in the Bronx and asks for "Pepón's art project" (the number is 718-328-3434). The decorated Lincoln Town Cars have become at once artwork, alternative space and a traveling exhibition. Mr. Osorio has prepared their drivers to explain the work.

As in his earlier pieces, like the installation "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)," which became one of the emblems of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Mr. Osorio has assembled an array of cheap store-bought decorations: ceramic curios, polyester lace, gold doilies, cloth flowers. He has arranged them to exaggerate the exuberance of Latino interiors — in this case on dashboard and rear window — and integrated them with video and text to create a tableau that makes a social and political point.

Mr. Osorio was once a social worker in the Bronx, and while he believes that social work cannot change lives, he is equally certain that art can. He says he wants his art to act a mirror, allowing people to look at one another and at themselves. Mr. Osorio's work, which is highly theatrical, can be understood differently depending on where it's encountered: on the streets of the Bronx it reflects a living reality; in a museum or

Want a ride in an artwork? Just call for 'El Cab,' a project in which an artist has transformed seven taxis in memory of a murdered cabbie.

A detail of Mr. Osorio's artwork on a taxi's dashboard—Exuberance to go.

gallery it becomes an art object that confronts viewers with unfamiliar lives.

"El Cab" speeds up the travel between the South Bronx and that art world, and the passing scenery becomes part of the artwork because it is seen through the thronged heaven that decorates the dashboard: on a gold-fringed red velvet cloth, a little black paste musician — blindfolded with rags and festooned with a sash made of paper Dominican flags — plays his silent tunes amid cotton clouds and cloth roses. Garlands of plastic roses circle the inside roof, and a frieze of cloth marigolds frames the rear-window ledge on which stands an extravagant tissue box embellished with gold-plastic fretwork through which a map of the Bronx can be glimpsed. Stenciled on the back window is the inscription, In Memory of Twenty-Nine: 1960-1996.

Twenty-nine was the identification number of Sergio Jimenez, a driver who was shot dead early on the morning of Oct. 30, 1996. Mr. Jimenez — 29, as everyone called him — was not, as it happens, shot in the line of duty but in a brawl in an after-hours bar. By the time Mr. Osorio found out the circumstances, however, he was well into his art making, a process that begins with people-watching and personal interviews. Through these, he forms his ideas and proceeds to shopping for suitable baubles in the rich lode of car-parts stores, junkyards and tchotchke shops in the Bronx. "You know, I let the work take the shape of whatever exists," he says. "It's like, let the community inform me what's going on out there, and then I do the work based on that."

When he first thought of the taxi-driver memorial nearly two years ago, he imagined using a yellow cab, but the statistics changed his mind. Of 17 taxi drivers murdered that year, only one had been in a yellow cab. In addition, Mega Radio Dispatcher is just down the street from Mr. Osorio's studio on Longwood Avenue.

Last month, Mr. Osorio and City Councilman Guillermo Linares sat in the cramped office of Manuel Fernandez, the president of Mega, their conversation almost drowned out by the hilarity emanating from the back room, where drivers between shifts were dancing merengue and playing pool. Mr. Linares, who is Dominican and was once a cabdriver, talked of his attempts to form a coalition of bases, like Mega, of owner-driven cars. Livery drivers typically can't afford life insurance, Mr. Fernandez said, so Mega drivers are sending money to 29's three sons in the Dominican Republic, as Mr. Jimenez himself once did.

Two days later, as Mr. Osorio rides with one of the seven volunteers — Victor Tejeda, No. 245 — a picture of 29's life and death begins to emerge.

"He always had troubles with passengers," Mr. Tejeda explains. "He had a strong character, and black people, teenagers — they didn't like to pay. Most drivers let it go. He said, 'Anybody who sits in back has to pay.' "

Mr. Osorio responds: "I'm black myself. Do you agree with the yellow cabs that don't pick up black people?"

"I need to take care of myself," Mr. Tejeda insists.

"This is interesting," Mr. Osorio says after paying Mr. Tejeda $10 for the ride. "What I want to do with this work of art is to go back to the last place a cabdriver didn't pick me up and be inside there and say I'm talking about *you*."

At Krystal Party Town, a novelty store in the Bronx, Mr. Osorio buys a band of tiny black cherubs and then blindfolds them for the piece. He calls it the Denial Band, signifying the drivers' denial of racism. Most of the livery drivers barely speak English; the world outside the safety of their car seems hostile and overwhelming. And, in the end, that is how the world looks to a passenger inside the claustrophobic excess of Mr. Osorio's installation.

This is particularly true in the day-shift cars. In these Mr. Osorio has installed video monitors that face the passengers and show taped scenes from the Bronx as well as one of the seven drivers saying, "If I stay here another year, I doubt I'll be alive." □

Amei Wallach has written about contemporary art for 20 years.

Rear window of a taxi with the inscription: "In memory of twenty-nine 1960-1996."

Wilson, William. "Two-Room Installation Hits Home With Emotion." *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1997, pp. F2, F12.

Two-Room Installation Hits Home With Emotion

ART REVIEW

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

The piece is both unusual and familiar, funny, touching and ominous. Installed in the main gallery of the Otis College of Art and Design in Westchester, it's titled "Badge of Honor" and concerns a conversation between a teenage boy and his jailed father.

The artist is Puerto Rican Pepón Osorio, 40, now living in New York. His educational credentials are a little unusual for an artist—a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in education. His art proves you don't need formal training to be good. No one who sees it will be surprised to learn Osorio has also served as a social worker.

"Badge of Honor" is a life-size installation consisting of two abutted rooms. One is a prison cell. Starkly austere with its built-in cot, sink and toilet, there is little in it to suggest occupancy except a pair of running shoes and a few family album-style photographs. A center wall divides it from a space that is clearly a teenage boy's bedroom.

Inside the boy's room, there is the usual clutter—kung fu and basketball posters, a bike and a boombox. The bike is new and looks expensive. In addition to the music player, there's a TV and seven pairs of fashionable Nike-style footgear.

In its way, the decor is downright opulent, even luxurious. A billowing quilt in white satin with a pattern of red roses drapes across the bed trailing on a mirrored floor. The mattress box is lined with clenched gold-gilded fists. (Rings that festoon their fingers are actually car air-fresheners.) The rear wall is completely papered with baseball cards.

Despite the consumer goods, the environment doesn't feel store-bought. It's a kind of filigreed folk-baroque interior that positively drips familial love. It is at once poetic, surreal, completely convincing of reality and rich with implied narrative.

Yet, instead of allowing his audience to dwell on literary intimations—such as evocations of Gabriel García Marquéz's magic realism—the artist gets right to work letting us know there is something badly awry in the boy's magic kingdom.

Before viewers really have time to take in the rooms, their attention is compelled by a repeated 22-minute conversation between two oversize talking male heads pro-

Please see 'BADGE,' F12

'BADGE': Otis' Documentary Installation

Continued from F2

jected in black and white on the side walls of each room. The faces are turned toward each other, but are separated by the center divider. On the prison side, the speaker appears to be a Latino male in his early 30s, although he looks older when you see that his front teeth are missing. The boy in the bedroom looks to be about 15. There is a light down of hair on his upper lip. Family resemblance—and relationship—is unmistakable.

Their conversation—carried on in formal, almost courtly accents—consists mainly of questions. The father asks if the boy loves him even though the father hasn't been a good parent. The son replies he'd gladly give up all his gear and nice things just to have his old man home.

An allusion by Dad to "drinking and fighting" is the only clue given to his detention. There's a poster of a young boxer in the boy's room that resembles the prisoner. When Dad warns his boy to stay away from a violent neighborhood pal, the kid defends his friend as "cool." The chum clearly reminds both of Dad.

Another question leads to the third, but absent, principal in this drama, Mom. Both father and son adore her and credit her as the strong and saintly center holding the family together against intolerable odds. Both would give her their "Badge of Honor."

Osorio's piece does several remarkable things. Made as a kind of community outreach exercise in 1995 under the aegis of New Jersey's Newark Museum, it was first shown in an old storefront in a Newark working-class district that's predominantly Latino and African American. Its audience were regular folks who just wandered in. Many reportedly were moved to tears.

Otis College of Art and Design

Pepón Osorio's "Badge of Honor" installation uses a prison cell wall to project an image of a father, talking to his son in the next room.

The work is an authentic documentary. Osorio enlisted the collaboration of New Jersey's penal system to find a real prisoner and his son. They are identified only as Nelson Sr. and Nelson Jr. Yet while the video drama rings with authenticity and timeliness, the environment Osorio has placed it in elevates it to a work of art that addresses universal questions about who wins when the power of individual love confronts the impersonality of the system. He manages this without rancor or cant.

For an art audience, the piece is enriched with echoes of Edward Kienholz and intimations of today's Baroque theme-park world, where the privileged prefer to live in illusion.

■ *Otis College of Art and Design, 9045 Lincoln Blvd.; through Sept. 6, closed Sundays-Mondays, (310) 665-6905.*

Ziolkowski, Thad. "Pepon Osorio."
Artforum XXXV, no. 3 (November 1996): 97-98.

PEPÓN OSORIO

RONALD FELDMAN

It is difficult to deny the initial power of Pepón Osorio's installation *Badge of Honor*, 1995, and it's not much easier to disentangle the various elements that produce that impact on later reflection. Much of this difficulty has to do with the lingering effects of finding that one had walked in on an intimate conversation between a Latino father and his son, which Osorio staged by building a bleak prison cell and a teenager's pop icon–encrusted bedroom on either side of a wall. Against the far wall of the cell was a large black and white video projection of the father, while on the facing wall of the bedroom was an analogous video projection of the son.

Why, the father asks, couldn't the son come home on time? Why, replies the son, does the father spend so much time in prison? Mesmerized both by the intensity of these seemingly genuine interrogations and the study in contrasts made possible by the two spaces, one hovered at the interface of the installation—and remained divided between two modes of engagement: either eavesdropping in the ghetto-touristic manner made almost instinctive by TV, film, and sociological studies, or taking in the formal boldness of Osorio's installation.

Nuanced but also a bit awkward, the video dialogue had the feel of the real thing—that is, one conducted by an actual father and son. And it turned out that the father was in fact an inmate in New Jersey's Northern State Prison. While perhaps somewhat too grim, too void of personal touches, the prison cell in which his image

Pepón Osorio, *Badge of Honor*, 1995, mixed media. Installation view.

appeared seemed to have been built with great attention to details of dimension and materials. The son's room, its walls teeming with heroic images from kung fu flicks and sports, the floor tiled with mirrors, the bed abutting an altar bearing family photos and an upholstered Puerto Rican flag, was as hyperbolic as the cell was muted.

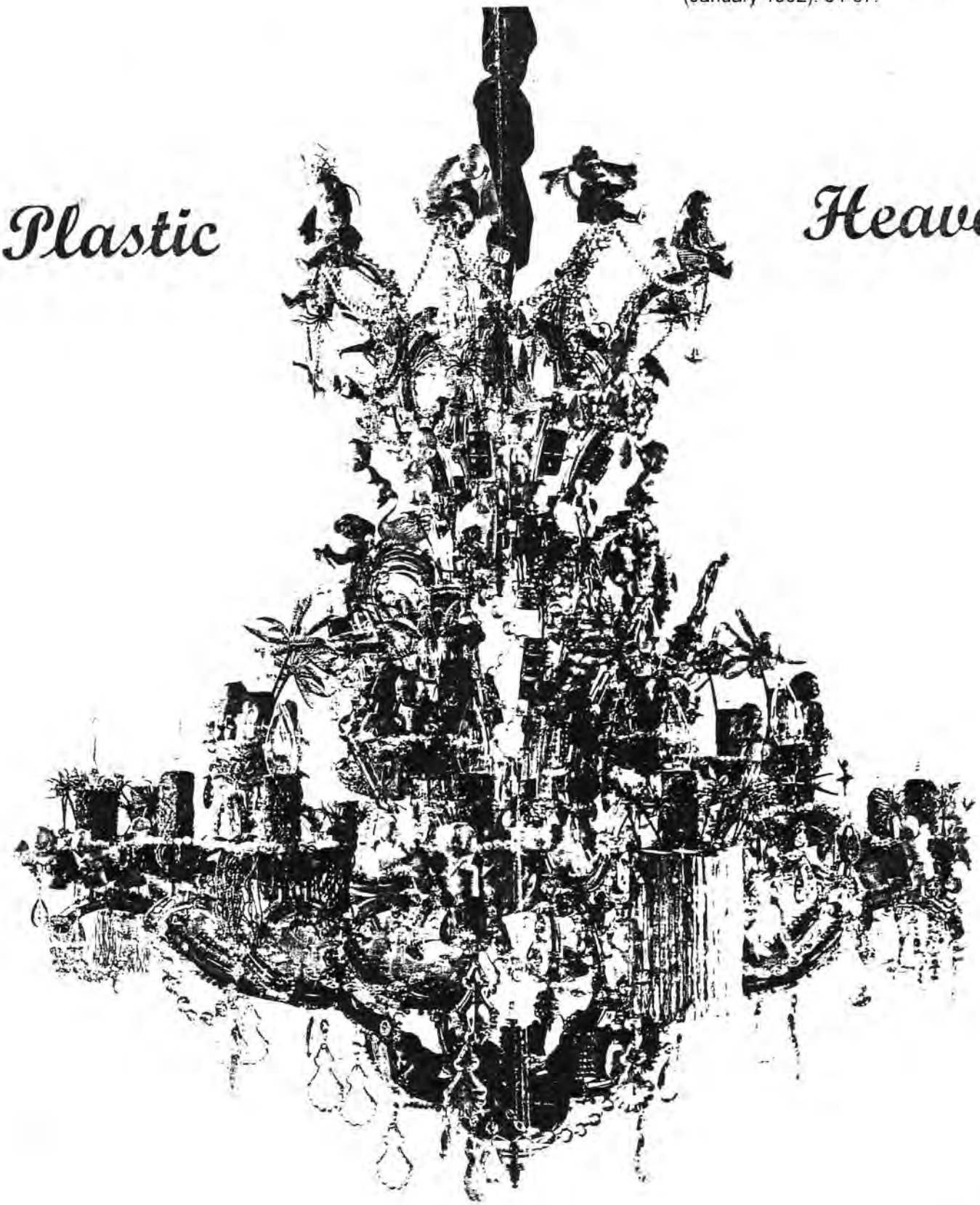
Badge of Honor was divided between this fidelity to the social realities of poverty and incarceration and a kind of baroque, magical-realist exaggeration. And between the crack of this divide rose the specter of ethnology, the question of whether we were standing before a kind of natural-history museum diorama, and the degree to which the politics of such representation inevitably vitiated the tenderness and good intentions of the realism and muddled the boldness of the installation's staging.

"It should come as no surprise," wrote Joseph Jacob, curator of the Newark Museum, where *Badge of Honor* was installed after its debut in a vacant store in downtown Newark, "that Pepón Osorio has a background in sociology and as a social worker." On the whole, *Badge of Honor* moved me, but its theatrics of confession did so in a way I feel obliged to resist—in precisely the way I want to resist the divisions within our social order that make Osorio's disclosures news, and social work necessary.

—Thad Ziolkowski

Acocella, Joan. "Plastic Heaven." *Artforum* XXX, no. 5 (January 1992): 64-67.

Plastic Heaven



Joan Acocella

When you look up at Pepón Osorio's *El Chandelier* (The chandelier, 1988), you can hardly believe your eyes. It's a chandelier all right, but decorated with a thousand tiny knickknacks. There are toy cars and squirt guns, dominoes and swans, plastic saints, plastic lepers, plastic rhinos and giraffes and monkeys. The light bulbs are surrounded with little plastic palm trees and set in golden cups from which kewpie dolls peep out, some in turbans, some in straw hats. On every perch there hover little white doves, little brown ballerinas. From every arm of the chandelier plastic babies dangle, wrapped in white blankets and tied with ribbons, some pink, some blue. Looping from arm to arm are swags of pearls, cascades of fringe. And sticking out here and there—pièce de résistance—are plastic fingernail extenders, disembodied fingertips with scarlet nails, simultaneously pointing at and beckoning to you.

The fact that this amazing thing hangs above you makes it all the more marvelous. You look up at it as if to a Tiepolo ceiling, with wave upon wave of angels and saints, all sitting on their cloudbanks, having a good time, promising you that there is a heaven. Osorio's chandelier may be a knickknack heaven, but it is dazzling in the same way as a Tiepolo. Osorio is Puerto Rican, and this is a Puerto Rican paradise.

The pop richness of *El Chandelier* could be seen in almost every work in Osorio's recent retrospective at El Museo del Barrio in New York. The show was called "*Con To' los Hierros,*" which roughly translates as "Giving it all you've got," and that is Osorio's philosophy. "More is better," as he says in the interview included in the catalogue. But as you move from piece to piece, the meanings of plenitude deepen: the geyser becomes a well.

The most thrilling piece in the show, *La Cama* (The bed, 1987), was an installation featuring a fantastically elaborate four-poster bed. Each of the bedposts is painted a different color—green, purple, red, orange—and studded with the same kind of gimcrack treasures that adorn the chandelier: combs, pearls, zircons, decals of chickens and fairies. But this is a serious bed, an eschatological bed. Wrapped around its footboard is a huge plastic serpent, the devil. Atop one of the posters, a death's-head bride and groom are frying an egg. To counteract these evil spirits, there are doves and angels everywhere. The pillows are covered with saints' medallions. Most amazing of all, the entire surface of the bedspread is covered with *capias*, Puerto Rican party favors: little rosettes of lace with ribbons printed in gold, saying things like "Happy Birthday Jay and El Baron" and "Cookie's Baby Shower."

So this is the bed of birth, marriage, and death. It has a personal meaning for Osorio. When he was a child, his family had a housekeeper, Juana Hernández, who was a second mother to him. (His mother worked.) Juana was an orphan, very poor, very religious. She went barefoot, but wore as many earrings as her ears could accommodate. As a boy, Osorio used to sneak into her bedroom and rummage through her drawers, poring over the earrings, necklaces, rouge pots, and religious medals that constituted a poor woman's treasure (and that probably inspired, in some measure, Osorio's art).

Juana died in 1982, seven years after Osorio left Puerto Rico for New York. In 1987 he made *La Cama* as a tribute to her. On the baseboard of the room in which the bed stands he has written a description of a dream in which he visits Juana on her deathbed and tries, haltingly, to tell her about his fiancée. That fiancée was real: Merián Soto, a choreographer and performance artist, also Puerto Rican, whom Osorio met in New York in 1978, collaborated with on a number of projects, and married in the same year that he made *La Cama*. The headboard of the bed consists of a large photograph of Soto, aged maybe eight, in a tutu and tiara, obviously at a dance recital. (As accompaniment for her childhood dream, each of the bedposts is topped by a music box that plays Tchaikovsky's music for *Swan Lake*.) Her photo is framed in a golden sunburst. On the opposite side of the headboard is a photograph of a very young Osorio, framed in a burst of cigars, plastic bridegrooms, and garlic bulbs. Studding almost every surface of the bed are little plastic baby dolls, some black, some white, the imagined product of Osorio's and Soto's union. (He is black; she is white.) Riding across the top of the headboard are toy carriages, fit for Cinderella, drawn by plumed horses, and at the base of Soto's photograph is a pair of pink ballerina slippers. So almost everything is here: man and woman, art and life, black and white, childhood love and adult love, New York and Puerto Rico, God and the devil, birth and death. Together, of course, with popular art—a thousand examples of it—pasted and sewed and wired together into a piece of high art, shown in a museum.

Central to the show is the question of cultural identity that is so pressing to Puerto Ricans, coming as they do from a culture that was riven by Spanish colonialism and the slave trade and then annexed by the United States. In the course of the latter convulsion, Puerto Rico became divided not just geographically but culturally, acquiring a second center, New York, which became a port of exile for many of the island's poorest people at the same time that it became an escape hatch for many of the island's most gifted people, including Osorio. Nothing could look more Puerto Rican than Osorio's art, with its gaiety, abundance, and color, its love of tchatchkes and religious paraphernalia. And nothing could look more New York–like than Osorio's work, with its simultaneous embrace of and remove from that colorful world. Latinos, he recently said, have a habit of "creating an abundance that is not there, and not looking beyond it."[1] The idea for *El Chandelier* came to Osorio one night when, standing

on a street on New York's Lower East Side, he looked up and saw seven or eight chandeliers shining in the windows of a poverty-ridden housing project. So the piece is not just a heaven; it is the heaven you dream of when you are in something like hell. With it, Osorio means to comment both on a people who, living in deprivation, will comfort themselves with these icons of richness and on a society that, by depriving them, sends them to such substitutes.

The writers of the catalogue essays are at pains to point out the political meanings of Osorio's work. "As in life," writes Kellie Jones, "the appearance of exuberance and lightheartedness [in Osorio's art] often masks a deeper seriousness, even melancholy, or political intent....His abundance parodies a world where people of color often lack the basics of health care, education, and money."[1] Not just his explicators but Osorio too is worried that people won't get the point. "The element of popular culture makes...people see the work as humor," he says in the catalogue interview. "But it is not so."[2]

This worry, together with the recent escalation of political anger in this country, may help to account for the decreased decorativeness and increased rhetorical bluntness of Osorio's work in the past three years. Some of these newer pieces are heavy-handed; they clobber you. *Maria Cristina Martinez Olmedo, D.O.B., 3/27/89*, 1989, shows a black baby, a doll, lying gravely ill in a gaily decorated bassinet. Others are very effective. One of the most striking things in the show was a 1991 installation called *El Velorio* (The wake). Essentially, it was a funeral-parlor room with seven coffins, all for people who died of AIDS. Some of the coffins were open, showing photographs of the dead. Over them were plaques with descriptions of the victims or statements from the people they left behind. "When she died," says one, "I was still very angry....We had quit drugs three years ago." *El Velorio* is utterly austere. You have to read the wall label in order to believe that it was done by the same artist who made *La Cama*.

But if Osorio and his commentators are concerned that much of his work will gladden the hearts of those who see it, there is reason to worry. Most of the pieces in this show radiate a joyfulness that resists deconstruction. Or, if we are to read through it, what we would read is the desire for beauty, the love of richness, the hunger for life. Osorio may see that his chandelier is a plastic heaven, and with it he may be telling us a story about poverty. At the same time, however, he clearly loves this chandelier—loves kewpie dolls and toy cars, fantasy and extravagance—and you can feel as you look at it the pleasure he had in making it. In the catalogue interview he speaks with pride of the fabulous, four-foot-high wedding cakes that his mother, a part-time baker, used to make for the people back home. They were "incredible productions," he says, "fountains...sugar...dolls...oceans....That was very important for me."[3] *El Chandelier* is obviously the child of those wedding cakes.

If Osorio's attitude toward his culture is divided between participation and meditation, embrace and distance, that makes him more like one of a thousand artists who come from, love, and in a deep sense know nothing but a culture that only later they discover is disadvantaged, despised. Once they make the discovery, they acquire perspective. But that perspective never eliminates the world of meanings that preceded it, and these artists' deepest

imaginings are still conceived in that world. When you look at *El Chandelier*, you see its wit—its juxtaposition of Tiffany's with Woolworth's, its astonishing excess—and you sense its political meaning. But when you look at it again, you feel the same wonder that the Lower East Side project-dwellers must feel when they gaze at their chandeliers, or that Osorio felt as he fingered the treasures of Juana Hernández: it is beautiful. I wish I owned it.

Given Osorio's divided feelings, however, probably the most representative work in the show is *A Mis Adorables Hijas* (To my darling daughters, 1990). This is a velvet couch trimmed in gold. Its top is encrusted, Osorio-style, with relics of the owner's life—hairpins, thimbles, *milagros*, plastic houseflies—and across its purple cushions is written a suicide note: "I have to confess to you that I don't feel as well as I used to...the pain is stronger every day....I hope that in time you will forgive me...." Here is a political tragedy. Like *El Chandelier*, the piece is an emissary from the lives of the Puerto Rican poor. We can imagine the woman, guess how long she saved to buy the couch, see her dying on it. At the same time, *A Mis Adorables Hijas* is simply a plain old tragedy, full of the darkness of life, not just the lives of Puerto Ricans. Though it lacks the joy that enlivens so many of Osorio's pieces, it epitomizes the power of transformation that gives his work its deep and magical character: how everything he makes is full of voices, crawls with history and memory—how you can see Cookie's baby in a party favor, hear an old woman's voice from inside her couch, know people's lives from their objects. At the same time, the couch epitomizes the spirit of generosity that in so many ways, from the pearl swags to the politics, informs all of Osorio's work. □

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1. Pepon Osorio, in an interview with Felix Joaquin Rivera, "Why *More* Is Better," *Pepon Osorio*, exhibition catalogue, New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1991, p. 37.
2. Osorio, quoted in Susana Torruella Leval, "*Con Todos los Hierros*," *Pepon Osorio*, p. 12.
3. Kellie Jones, "Domestic Prayer," *Pepon Osorio*, p. 31.
4. Osorio, *Pepon Osorio*, p. 35.
5. Ibid.