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Art in Review

By **Holland Cotter**

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'Artists Respond' 'The "New World" Question' Studio Museum in Harlem 144 West 125th Street Through Aug. 22

In a Columbus quincentenary that has been heavy on rhetoric but short on memorable political art, one hoped that "Artists Respond: The 'New World' Question" would bring a fresh approach to the issues at hand. It does not. The contributions of these seven artists are for the most part as unfocused as the exhibition's perfunctory title.

Fred Wilson's tableau of traditional African sculptures from the Studio Museum's collection and of modern versions bought from New York street vendors is accompanied by a wall text that asks the right questions about how a culture can be co-opted. But the visually tepid installation lacks any urgency. Joe Lewis's "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" also raises a provocative point, about slavery and 20th-century imprisonment, but then loses it in an assemblage that is both overproduced and unincisive.

Incisiveness is the missing ingredient in the two other installations as well, although they are formally more assured. The coffin-shaped ceramic sculptures of Martha Jackson-Jarvis's "Last Rites," while impressively detailed, take only a general and oblique approach to the "Question" in question. Antonio Martorell's "Casaribe, Caricasa," a walk-in party favor with a lighted mosaic map of the Caribbean on its floor, gets at something of the complex play of darkness and light implicit in the concept of "New World," but it lacks the final degree of material flair one associates with this inventive artist.

Of the three taped performances, Kaylynn Sullivan TwoTrees's ritualistic "renaming ceremony" looks strictly New Age, and Emilio Cruz's enactment of colonialist conquest, which might have had some visceral punch as street theater, is merely loud and earnest in video close-up.

By contrast, Joyce Scott's performance is a winner. From her opening takeoff on a cocktail-lounge diva warbling "No More Negroes," to her long disquisition on genetic alteration, which manages to draw DNA, C.I.A. and N.E.A. together in a single phrase, she keeps her audience alert, amused, angry and challenged, which is more than any other artist in this show comes anywhere near doing.