

Smith, Roberta. "A Beating Heart of Social Import," *The New York Times*, 10 December 2009.

The New York Times

A Beating Heart of Social Import
By ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 10, 2009

There's a small, inspired exhibition cocooned inside "30 Seconds Off an Inch," an exhibition of 60 disparate artworks by 42 artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Similarly, its catalog essay, while convoluted and sometimes sophomoric, takes a refreshingly visual, even formal approach to art that is usually admired exclusively for its political and social meanings.

But the whole thing feels extremely green. It is no surprise to learn that show and catalog both are the first major effort of a 33-year-old assistant curator, Naomi Beckwith, who came to the Studio Museum in 2007, after a two-year fellowship at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

Ms. Beckwith clearly has an eye for artworks and their presentation, which can't be said for all young curators. Her exhibition thoughtfully juxtaposes intriguing works by young or lesser-known black and multiethnic artists like Shinique Smith, Jabu Arnell, Rashawn Griffin, Jennie C. Jones, Clifford Owens, Akosua Adoma Owusu and Xaviera Simmons, among others. Ms. Beckwith deserves every encouragement, but she also could have used a lot more guidance and advice in the shaping of this project.

Her show, she writes, asks viewers to consider the ways in which social meaning is embedded formally within works of art. Her complaint is that too often the work of nonwhite artists is seen in terms of the creators' social milieu. If an artist is black, she writes, his art is automatically viewed "as a commentary on black history" or is assumed to "originate from a black cultural tradition."

Ms. Beckwith seems to think that art is most effective when the connection runs the other way, and she's right: art can really only convey meanings extracted directly from it. These meanings may be traceable to the artist's milieu, whether social or political or even personal (unfortunately not much mentioned here), but they emanate from specific uses of specific materials, from what Ms. Beckwith calls "the art form," as opposed to "the art context."

Ms. Beckwith is gingerly broaching an often disparaged notion: the autonomy of the artwork. She thinks that the artists in "30 Seconds" achieve this autonomy by combining the tactics of two related tendencies. One is the postwar avant-garde of Fluxus, Gutai, Arte Povera and Brazilian Neo-Concretism — with their emphasis on everyday materials, language, performance and ephemera. The other is the more purely idea-oriented Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and early '70s, including, she is careful to point out in the catalog, "experimental work by black artists."

This idea seems credible enough at first, but becomes more myopic and exclusionary as Ms. Beckwith tries to nail it down. She also overlooks two recent shows related to hers: "Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970" at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston in 2005, and the excellent "L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints," an exhibition at the Jack Tilton Gallery in 2006, about West Coast assemblage, its use by black artists like John Outterbridge (who is in the Studio Museum show) and its effect on the early work of David Hammons (also here), an elusive eminence of contemporary art.

Despite the historic scope of the Studio Museum show, only four works date from before 2000, and three of those are by Mr. Hammons. History is a tantalizing perfume. (For example, there is the coincidence of little-known sculptures by Mr. Hammons and Chris Ofili, from 1978 and 1993, respectively, that consist primarily of varnished clumps of elephant dung.) But other influential older black artists — Mr. Outterbridge, Charles Gaines and Maren Hassinger — are represented by recent work, which doesn't seem quite fair, while Senga Nengudi is mentioned in the catalog but absent from the exhibition.

Smith, Roberta. "A Beating Heart of Social Import," *The New York Times*, 10 December 2009.

Another problem is familiarity: there are too many of the usual suspects who populate shows devoted to work by nonwhite artists. They include, I'm afraid, Mr. Hammons and Mr. Ofili, as well as Glenn Ligon, Nari Ward, Gary Simmons and William Pope.L. They may contribute to the show and its thesis, yet their presence also feels automatic, even tired.

The prevailing aesthetic here is a kind of Conceptual assemblage that is widely practiced by artists of all ethnic backgrounds these days. Is there a particular way that nonwhite artists use materials to communicate social and racial concerns among other meanings? Many works here make that case, to varying degrees, often with a little help from their titles, but meanings and references vary widely.

The range is especially clear in the show's most inspired moment, a display of three works in a downstairs gallery. Kori Newkirk's "Untitled" is a wire shopping-cart inset with squares of brightly colored plexiglass; the stained-glass effect turns it into a radiant, perambulating article of faith. But its impoverishment and improvised, beautifying ingenuity have more to do with class than race. Rashid Johnson exercises a similar economy in a large swath of paper spray-painted with the word "Death" in big gold letters, directing some deft Conceptual wordplay in a different direction. The work's title is "Death Is Golden," a transposition that takes the mind from "silence is golden" to "silence equals death," the 1980s rallying cry of AIDS activism. Demetrius Oliver's "Asterism" circles obliquely back to race. It consists of a soft-sided black suitcase filled with big chunks of high-luster anthracite coal and large, clear light bulbs. An asterism can be a constellation of stars, the starlike gleams of certain minerals or a group of asterisks — which are, if you think about it, black stars.

Everything else here falls more or less within the parameters loosely described by these three works. Mr. Outterbridge's "Portrait of Willie" gets right to the point, brilliantly extracting multiple yet focused meanings from detritus. His strands of rusted iron washers and a small bouquet of dreadlocks conjure African art, a demeaned black stereotype (perhaps Willie Horton) and the breastplate of a revered warrior.

Leslie Hewitt's "Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist)" places two identical dark gray books with cast concrete pages askew on a larger white book. It suggests blacks united against whites but also a fusion of Malevich's Suprematist paintings of black-and-white squares, landmarks of early Modernism that were also a form of artistic resistance.

One of the most quietly poignant works is Edgar Arceneaux's untitled black-and-white photograph of a little metal grid sculpture placed on an outdoor chess board in a desolate playground, which resonates between life and art, imagination and deprivation, playful and oppressive geometries. And Michael Queenland's brilliant "Untitled (Black Balloon Rock)" — nothing more than a dozen small smooth stones each inserted in a black balloon — is a visceral batch of contradictions: earth and air, indestructible and fragile, bodily organs and excrement and skin.

I leave to you the equally rich contradictions of Nicole Miller's awkward, unsettling video "The Conductor," in which a black man conducts an invisible orchestra without using his arms, which means mostly through facial expressions. The result evokes minstrelsy, silent movies, race relations and an almost frightening array of human emotions. Lasting only about seven minutes, it feels too long, which is part of the point.

The show's opaque title comes from an old interview with Mr. Hammons in which he said that objects and structures built by white people have a telltale "neatness." In those built by blacks, he said, "everything is a 32nd of an inch off." It's a preposterous generalization, and not just because the measurement in question is so minute. But Ms. Beckwith recycles it, with adjustments, into a title that requires explanation and context — something that she seemed determined to avoid in the artworks she selected for her flawed but promising exhibition.