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Art and Race, Making a Memorable Appearance

By Blake Gopnik April 6, 2003

Washington is a political town. Washington is a town preoccupied with race. And Washington is a town where political art, especially when it's about race, rarely gets an outing. It's a pleasure to see a whole exhibition -- in a for-profit gallery, no less -- that confronts racial politics head-on but with real subtlety.

In the brilliantly titled "Skin Deep," dealer Cheryl Numark invited New York critic and curator Franklin Sirmans to take a look at how artists today are coming to grips with issues of race and group identity. Numark's small space and modest resources don't allow for a thorough survey of the topic, but Sirmans and Numark have dipped into it to good effect: The 10 artists they've sampled show just how vexed the issues are and how willing artists are to deal with that vexation.

The work of young Korean American artist Nikki Lee questions the whole idea of crisp social divides and clear, inborn ethnicity. In a project that's been going on for a few years now, Lee inserts herself into various subcultures in our Melting Pot, lives with them to internalize their ways, and then has herself photographed as though she'd always been among them. She's gotten dolled up as a Manhattan yuppie, heavy with shopping bags and poodle; she's infiltrated poor white backwaters and had herself snapped as a classic bleached blonde sprawled on a Camaro's hood; and, in the "Hispanic Project" that's represented by two works at Numark, she's signed up for Latino culture. Fancied up as a Hispanic girly-girl, with halter top and heavy makeup and plenty of Latina sass, Lee manages to look as though she's to the barrio born -- and as though her inborn Asian features mattered much less than the trappings of the culture that she's taken on.

Racial identities, it turns out, aren't even skin-deep. They depend on what you put on top of skin, and how and to whom you show it off. Lee can pull off her chameleon trick because America today, what with adoption, immigration and intermarriage, is a truly mixed bag. It's not that we all have the free will to choose precisely who we want to be -- Lee's costume changes are about making art; she doesn't really live her life in constant social flux. It's just that a simple thing like skin color or eye slant can't quite account for how cultures form and who gets to belong to them.

The District's own Iona Brown discovered this same fact, and ran with it. A few years ago, the young artist came across a movement among Japanese teenagers, known as ganguro, in which kids darken their skin and kink their hair and generally style themselves in emulation of their rap-star heroes. Rather than simply document this peculiar transcultural phenomenon, Brown translated it into art-historical terms.

Brown has taken the classic figures of Japanese wood-block prints and given them a hip-hop twist. One elegant beauty, who at first looks straight out of the Floating World of imperial Edo, has low-rise jeans peeking out from under her kimono; her powdered face has a swath of brown foundation cleanly painted across its front; her hair, which she admires in a pair of hand mirrors, is in cornrows in front and a frizzy mane in back. Another blackface lovely's hair is piled high and wrapped inside a length of striking orange cloth, African style; she smokes a massive doobie.

Japanese prints are deeply artificial things. They're as much about exquisite surface pattern as about the people they show. And they're often portraits of actors playing roles out of the highly stylized world of Kabuki. (Women weren't allowed onstage, so the kind of "female" portraits Brown has copied might, in fact, have been of young male stars, the Tom Cruises of their day, in drag.) And all this artistic and theatrical artifice is not that much more artificial than what goes on in human cultures, as groups construct identities almost from whole cloth, or at least out of a patchwork of borrowed odds and ends.

In this exhibition, even established artists famous for a strong take on race keep their positions unusually subtle.

Photographer Carrie Mae Weems presents two sepia-toned images of young black girls dressed in their Sunday best and lolling on the grass. They look like posed pictures from the 1950s, when images of well-dressed black children worked hard to rise above the troubled realities of race. Flower-print sundresses and carefully coiffed heads presented an image of idyllic childhood that prejudice could not touch. In Weems's subtly updated versions, however, the girls' world-wise faces make it clear they're living today, and only pretending to an innocence long lost to an entire culture. Or maybe they are asserting their power to take on the trappings of that innocence again, but now in defiance of prejudice rather than in denial of it.

Bronx-born Glenn Ligon also explores childhood and blackness, and also avoids clear-cut conclusions about it.

During a recent residency in Minneapolis, Ligon came across a trove of black-power coloring books left over from the 1970s, when he was young. He passed out copies of their pages to black kids in the Twin Cities, to see what they would make of putting their crayons to the face of Malcolm X, to a scene of a shotgun-toting Harriet Tubman defending fleeing slaves or to an African princess's crown. The answer was, not much, and Ligon reproduces that cryptic response in his large-scale screen prints in this show, based on the kids' original colorings.

School-age children carefully colored three Afroed basketball players in green, pink and yellow -- without a hint of blackness in sight. Younger ones scribbled in black all over poor Malcolm X, but it is impossible to tell whether this was random mark-making or an attempt at accurate skin tone. One of the peculiarities of a coloring book done all in outline drawing, of course, is that it is impossible to mark the race of figures by their skin tone. In this pictorial world, everybody's flesh starts out paper-colored.

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Once it gets into children's hands, a coloring book produced with strong political intentions seems to become just another art supply. The kind of consciousness-raising that these pictures were originally meant to do -- that much of Ligon's own art has been about -- seems to have a hard time overcoming the inertias of daily life and children's play.

Even the famously aggressive racial art of Kara Walker doesn't have a clear message; the black community itself is divided about it. Using the genteel craft of cut-out silhouettes, Walker presents nightmare images pulled from the Old South: a white plantation mistress surrounded by the black heads she's cut off; a flying angel pouring "whiteness" onto a black man down below on Earth. (The two images at Numark are at the mild end of Walker's art; rape and surreal debauchery are her more typical antebellum fare.) There's a scream in Walker's picturemaking, but it's a scream of confusion and dismay rather than a broadcast of crisp conclusions about things.

Like much of the best art in this exhibition -- several pieces admittedly fall short of this high standard -- it comes closer to Goya's sardonic grimace at the follies of mankind than to political cartooning.

Skin Deep continues at Numark Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, through April 26. Call 202-628-3810 or visit numarkgallery.com

Questioning the idea of crisp social divides: The Numark Gallery's "Skin Deep" show includes photos from Nikki Lee's "Hispanic Project" and Iona Brown's "a3 blackface #41," right.Glenn Ligon's "Boy With Basketball, Harriet Tubman, Salimu, Letter B #5": Exploring childhood and blackness, but avoiding clear-cut determinations.A scream of confusion and dismay rather than a broadcast of crisp conclusions: Scene 26 of Kara Walker's "The Emancipation Approximation."Carrie Mae Weems's "After Manet": Children pretending to an innocence long ago lost to an entire culture.