

Newsweek

HARLEM GOES 'FREESTYLE'

BY PETER PLAGENS ON 5/13/01 AT 8:00 PM

Does contemporary art by African-Americans have a necessary "blackness" to it? "I'm not the person to come to for essentialist ideas about black culture," says Studio Museum in Harlem curator Thelma Golden. Indeed, at first glance the Golden-curated "Freestyle," a survey of 28 emerging black artists from across the nation at the museum (through June 24), looks a lot like a vest-pocket Whitney Biennial. There are a few deliberately offhand-looking paintings, some messed-with photography and some MTV-length videos playing in a viewing room in the back of the museum. And nearly every participant holds the de rigueur Master of Fine Arts degree from a big university or topflight art school.

But somehow "Freestyle" is different. Its collective passion and grit--most of the artists are saying something about race--keeps the show from devolving into the hyperclever anomie that infects almost every other revue of emerging artists these days. "Freestyle" puts the museum on the map not only as a place to see some good contemporary art, but as an institution that might help lead it away from its current fascination with the adolescent side of pop culture.

The Studio Museum has been around for 33 years. During that time, it's staged wonderful exhibitions of Wifredo Lam and Romare Bearden, and maintained a residential studio program that's boosted the careers of such artists as Nari Ward and Maren Hassinger. But when longtime director Kinshasha Conwill left in 1999, the museum's board decided to bring in some major-institution clout. Current director Lowery Sims says with a smile, "I'd spent half my entire life at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." And Golden recalls, "The very first time I came to bat as a curator--as a 27-year-old doing the 1993 Whitney Biennial--it was like the bottom of the ninth, game tied, at Yankee Stadium." (That biennial was the notorious "politically correct" edition savaged by most critics.) After a change of directors at the Whitney in 1998, Golden was out. She resurfaced in charge of the extensive collection of software genius Peter Norton and then, 16 months ago, was picked by Sims to be part of the new one-two punch at the Studio Museum.

Harlem is changing, too; 125th Street is noticeably more multiracial, and not just because of presidents scouting office space or clots of German tourists searching for the Apollo Theater (right across 125th), Sylvia's restaurant (up on Lenox Avenue) and hip-hop jeans stores (10 to the block). A few serious galleries (like Firehouse, Gallery X and Project) have sprung up; artists of all colors are finding Harlem as amiable for working space as SoHo used to be, and grumblings about gentrification abound. But the surest sign that the museum wants to plunge one tootsie into the greater art world (as well as keeping the other foot firmly planted in what Sims and Golden accept as "the community") is "Freestyle."

Highly anticipated in the art world as a signal of both Golden's preferences in up-and-coming artists and the Studio Museum's new direction, "Freestyle" succeeds on both counts. The work in the show--with just a few understandable exceptions (half the artists weren't born until the '70s)--is very good. Standouts include Rashid Johnson's melodramatic photographs, Eric Wesley's "Kicking Ass" (a mechanical donkey who kicks holes in the wall) and Rico Gatson's hilarious "Jungle Jungle" video, a kaleidoscopic riff on "King Kong." The video room is, in fact, the soul of the exhibition; viewers should check out Clifford Owens's superb "Infidelity" (2000), a slow, muscular dance of a man simply climbing in and out of bed. "Freestyle" also boasts that rarest of all artists: a good, young, no-nonsense abstract painter, Jerald Ieans.

Some might say that the new generation of black artists has forsaken a duty to make protest art. But, as Golden puts it, the art in "Freestyle" is free from the idea that it must "right every wrong" in the world. Result: her exhibition may not be essentialist, but for anybody interested in where contemporary art, with luck, might go next, it sure is essential.