

Power meets vulnerability

Wall mural, exhibit tackle social issues

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ART REVIEWS

THINK AGAIN: Actions Speak

HUMAN NATURE(S)

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, through summer 2009 and Feb. 15, respectively.
508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

WORCESTER - Three microphones appear in "Actions Speak," the new giant mural by the artist duo THINK AGAIN at the Worcester Art Museum. One caked with lipstick lies beside a second covered with a red condom. The third hangs bare over a pile of human bones, as if waiting for the dead to rise and speak. Ashes and salt fill the background with a grim black and white. Text floats down beside the first two microphones: "smear," "violate," "misquote," and more aversive words.

It's the latest installation in the "Wall at WAM" series, for which the museum invites artists to fill a 17-by-67-foot expanse in its Renaissance Court, overlooking sixth-century Roman mosaics. The piece - a hybrid of photography, drawing, etching, and sculpture, all captured in a digital print - is a shocking, sobering work, impressive not only in scale, but in its gorgeous detail. For all its darkness, "Actions Speak" has an allure that makes it hard to turn away.

Artists S.A. Bachman and David John Attyah, who collaborate as THINK AGAIN, specialize in public art, including billboards and outdoor projections, hoping to spur dialogue and social action. They're used to working on this grand a scale. "Actions Speak" also has a public component - a projection of words from the mural, appearing on the museum's facade on the third Thursday of every month. More positive text emerges from the bleak flow, according to the museum.

"Actions Speak" works on several levels. The microphone is THINK AGAIN's signature image, a metaphor for free speech, for political possibility, and for the power of public expression - which turns out to be double-edged.

Those who speak have more clout than those who remain silent. Then there are those who have been forcibly silenced, signified by the bones, a pile of femurs tangled with microphone cords. The condom and the lipstick refer to social issues such as AIDS and violence against women, but the lipstick-covered microphone also made me think immediately of Sarah Palin, how she used her moment in the public eye, and how it was used against her.

"Actions Speak" probes the shadowy line between power and vulnerability. "Human Nature(s)," an exhibit of contemporary works drawn from WAM's recent acquisitions, often touches on the same theme. Most of the art is figurative, but some of it - like the bones in "Actions Speak" - merely refers to the body.

Unfortunately, "Human Nature(s)" turns out to be a roundup of the usual suspects, artists who have touched a nerve and become the darlings of many contemporary curators: Kara Walker, Laylah Ali, Zhang Huan, Kiki Smith, and Martha Rosler, among others.

Dynamics of power, race, and identity are bound to come up in an exhibit that aims to look at how artists answer the question "Who am I?" You can see it in Ali's fraught, funny painting "Untitled (Greenheads)," in which a cartoonlike figure holds one of the tethers attached to another's wrists and ankles, and in Walker's harrowing print "Scene of McPherson's Death from Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," in which a huge, leering, clownish black silhouette haunts the site of the death of a Union general.

Here women artists of color - Lorna Simpson and Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons also have pieces on view - most keenly explore issues of oppression, whether it has to do with class, race, sex, or some mix of the three. Campos-Pons and Simpson's photographs explore the history and identity of dark-skinned women.

Women's issues have a strong presence elsewhere as well. Smith's sculpture "Girl With Blue Dress," prim and frowning, elegantly captures something quintessential about girlhood. Louise Bourgeois's nightmarish "The Woven Child" explores motherhood's perils; in it, a soft-sculpture baby lies helplessly on the belly of a dressmaker's dummy.

A more uplifting tale of mothering, Shirin Neshat's sweet photograph "My Beloved," has a woman cradling a child inside her chador, which has been written over in Farsi: "I die in you ... but you are my life!" I'd like to see more contemporary art about fatherhood; perhaps the art world just hasn't found fathers as meaty as mothers.

Huan's arresting photo "Foam #1" does take on family and ancestry. The artist, his face half-covered in soap suds, holds an old family photo of a baby in his mouth. The foam-covered artist himself seems newborn, mythically, from the sea, and the photo in his mouth speaks more effectively than words about heritage and hope.

"Human Nature(s)" feels run of the mill, but the show does evoke how these artists struggle with what it means to be human. There's something deeply reassuring about that.

Illustration

Caption: Above: "Actions Speak," a mural by THINK AGAIN. Below (from left): "Girl With Blue Dress" by Kiki Smith; "Foam #1" by Zhang Huan in the exhibit "Human Nature(s)." Credit: Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent.

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