



Review of the *Race In Digital Space I.O* exhibition From THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Race and cyberculture

By JERRY CULLUM

For the Journal Constitution

The verdict: A show as instructive about media as it is about race.

This show is about digital space first and racial issues second. In a city where few major institutions give us even the past century, it's valuable to have this MIT-originated exhibition devoted to the one we live in. Whether the new sensibilities are good, bad or both, we can't evaluate them if they aren't presented in context.

There are three film and video programs running continuously with the sound slightly overlapping, mix tracks on personal CD players and digital programs on computers. All of them represent genuine artistic uses of new media by persons of color, mostly African-Americans. All are exploring genuine intellectual issues. And that's rare at a time when the field of new media is frequently devoted to assorted varieties of self-indulgence.

Of course, the pacing and visual and aural references are taken from television, Web sites and the aesthetics of club culture. But the TV strategies include the historical documentary alongside the cartoon show, and there is also a savvy awareness of the history of experimental films, just as there used to be in the makers of music videos.

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So the messages are delivered in shorter or longer sound bites, accompanied by adroitly altered historical photographs or bursts of color and a fast drum track. Some pieces question the commodification of the image of Malcolm X or the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat; some use unexpected images to undermine or complicate the borrowed rap lyrics of the sound-track.

The artworks assembled by curator Erika Dalya Muhammad alternate between history and possible futures. More than one artist finds parallels and ironies in the simultaneity of the decade of the first moon landing and the decade of the civil rights movement. Differently ironic, Los Cybrids' video "The Global Warmaquina: It's a Small Mundo" refers to the present contraction of high technology from ambitious space exploration to military uses.

Muhammad's categorization of the film and video into "testimony," "translation" and "travel" is somewhat arbitrary (viewers, shifting from one program to another, will do their own remix anyway), but it may be significant that her effort to balance ethnicities deliberately diminishes between the segments. On the one hand, cultures are melding and hybridizing in the cyberuniverse; on the other, they're striking out for their own distinct electronic destinies, so Muhammad's final section is devoted entirely to African-American artists creating a science-fiction-tinged "Afro-futurism." And that, too, is a fact worth pondering.

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