



Review of the *Race In Digital Space I.O* exhibition From CREATIVE LOAFING - ATLANTA

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Sensory overload

Spelman flexes new muscle with powerful *Race in Digital Space*

BY FELICIA FEASTER

Race in Digital Space at Spelman College's Museum of Fine Arts is an undeniably visceral exhibition that immediately grabs you by the scruff of the neck and refuses to inspire a simple or passive response.

Curator Erika Dalya Muhammad originated the show at M.I.T., and it is a hip, savvy show that signals the Spelman Museum's promising foray into cutting-edge contemporary work. Forthcoming at the museum is *One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art* in March 2003.

At times *Race in Digital Space* is nearly overwhelming with its barrage of stimuli. It is the kind of densely packed show that demands an afternoon spent unpacking the imagery and sound, or at least a return visit. Entering the digital "space" of the show is akin to surfing the Web and opening a succession of Russian nesting dolls leading to ever smaller, multiple boxes with a click of the mouse.

One downside of that hyper-stimulation occurs in the mini short-film festivals projected in two alcoves and also in the entrance hall of the sleek gallery space. A range of work, from a documentary about the "N" word to Christiane Robbins' deconstruction of OJ's televised "Bronco Chase," can often run together like the very TV-profuse imagery they critique. Many of the video pieces in *Race in Digital Space* are so thought-provoking that a

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visual rest -- a sherbet between the courses -- seems necessary in order to ponder the thicket of messages.

With its enormous film screens, music listening banks, computer terminals, CD-ROMs, websites, *Race in Digital Space* is Tower Records crossed with a movie-worthy sci-fi stimulation-athon.

Sci-fi allusions are, in fact, a reoccurring element in the show, like the imagery of satellites and weaponry that provide a mirror image of our increasingly detached virtual violence seen in the Los Cybrids video "The Global Warmaquina: It's A Small Mundo." A more melancholy version of this apocalyptic distance is expressed in Art Jones' video "Over Above," which proposes that our cars, buses, airplanes, TV screens and computers comprise a bubble that separates us from the events of real life.

Aided by the intoxicants of music and technology, what *Race in Digital Space* inspires is the cataclysmic impression that the future is already upon us, and that our increasingly wired world has the ability to leave race behind but also the equally possible potential to perpetuate hate in a new, more sophisticated form.

The most galvanic pieces in *Race in Digital Space* tend to be those using humor or rage, two responses to the absurdity of racism that register profoundly on the human injustice Richter scale. Rico Gatson's goofy, boyish video of the artist set against a perky bubblegum-pink background where he mugs bug-eyed and silly for the camera or interacts ludicrously with a black rag doll is especially successful. "Invisible" has Gatson both occupying the "I don't know nothin' about birthing no babies" racist caricature familiar from Hollywood movies, but also turning it back on itself, making caricature into a goof, like Flava Flav's over-the-top chain-draped rapper.

A brazenly funny, equally self-effacing goof occurs in Susan Smith-Pinelo's laugh-out-loud funny "Sometimes." The video is a tight-in close-up of the artist's bountiful bosom (draped with a gold necklace that proclaims "ghetto") which she manipulates offscreen to "dance" to a Michael Jackson song. Reclaiming the female body from its function as a music video prop, Smith-Pinelo's video, with shades of Adrian Piper's smart, canny attacks on sexism and racism, fights the cartoon absurdity of sexism with a far more sublime and knowing humor.

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The show incorporates conceptual work like Smith-Pinelo's and more didactic projects like Colette Gaiter's CD-ROM "SPACE/RACE," which contrasts the dreamy distractions of the space race with the more earthbound fight for social equality during the conflicted 1960s.

On the other end of the spectrum are the knife-edged accusations and questions lobbed at the media and its viewers by the collaborative biracial "art band" X-PRZ, whose video works transpose a Barbara Kruger, Situationist wordplay against horrific images of racial violence, history, celebrity and politics. Like much of the work in *Race for Digital Space*, X-PRZ's assaultive ripostes to consumer culture use the emotional trigger of music married to imagery to make the political short-hairs stand at attention.

It is rare to see a show in Atlanta so attentive to the awesome power of the media and so technically sophisticated and emotionally galvanizing in its approach to race. There is no doubt some of *Race's* power derives from the same sense of spectacle that defines much of the media. But if that's what it takes to inspire an emotional or intellectual response in viewers, that parallel may be a small quibble in a blockbuster-defined age when museums are having trouble luring in viewers in the first place.

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