

Challenging Perceptions Of A Troubled world

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | November 1, 2007

The blind don't often frequent art galleries, but Denise Marika is courting them, along with sighted visitors, to come to "Downrush," her video and Braille installation at Axiom. At once stark and lush, "Downrush," the centerpiece of "Witnesses," a small group show, compels viewers to consider what it means to be a witness and what it means to turn a blind eye.

The lighting is dim, so it's hard to see the Braille text that runs over three walls of the installation and beneath the two video projections. You have to touch it to experience it. The text comes from passages that reference witnesses in the Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran. It runs through the installation like the commentary of a Greek chorus.

The large-scale videos face each other. In each, a body bound in a cloth bag rolls down a set of wooden bleachers, heavily thudding over each step. That's Marika, who usually does her own excruciating stunts. Much of her work addresses the limits to which we can push ourselves; her body becomes a stand-in for the soul and its trials.

Low wooden bleachers like those in the video stretch across the gallery. When you sit on them, you become a spectator. And as you feel the seat give beneath your weight and hear the thud of the falling body, you can imagine yourself in that body bag. But you're not in it, so there's a sense of complicity, or responsibility; Marika makes you a witness.

Trains rumbling below the gallery, which is housed in the MBTA Green Street station, underline the emotional gravity of the piece. Its effect is visceral and commanding.

Think Again, the political-art duo of S.A. Bachman and David John Attyah, offers a smaller, pointed video installation, "Salt in the Wound (The NAFTA Effect)." The first screen shows an inviting bed, linens rumpled. The second makes that bed into a darkened landscape, lighted only by a moving

flashlight, intended to evoke Mexican immigrants' furtive passage into the United States.

A third video features text, which Think Again has projected in public spaces in Los Angeles and Boston and will take to New Bedford on Thanksgiving. It pairs descriptions of labor with ironic comments: "Trimming perfectly manicured 12-foot hedges. Salt in the wound: A 700-mile border fence." The movement from the intimacy of the bed to the hard work for little return is sobering.

Outside Axiom, Colombian-born artist Lina Maria Giraldo has affixed on the gallery's glass canopy words that people from around the world e-mailed to her to describe the United States. They include "opportunity," "empire," and "lucky." The piece doesn't have much edge - until you note that "lucky" and "home" are right next to a bullet hole in the glass.

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