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ART REVIEW; Art From Everywhere, All From Queens

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Queens is home to one of the city's great concentrations of art spaces, but when it comes to where artists live and work, Brooklyn has reigned supreme. Now Queens, with the rising art profile of Long Island City, Astoria and Jackson Heights, may be ready to challenge the hierarchy.

The third Queens International simultaneously addresses this issue and ignores it. Herb Tam, one of the curators of the current biennial, compares the struggle for interborough art world domination to the battling lyrics of the rappers Jay-Z and Nas in behalf of Brooklyn and Queens.

In the galleries, however, Queens International 2006 retreats quickly into celebrating the borough's long-acknowledged strength: its extraordinary ethnic diversity. The 52 artists and two collaboratives in the exhibition are natives of various regions of North America, as well as Bosnia, China, India, Iran, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Peru and Venezuela. The only common ground, perhaps, is that they all live in Queens.

Instead of arranging the work according to medium, ethnicity or generalized themes, the curators follow the edict of the exhibition's subtitle, "Everything All at Once." Just inside the entrance, a collaborative installation, "Nobody's Enemy," recreates the look of a living room in a Middle East war zone, with walls pockmarked by shrapnel, and furniture and carpets covered with dusty grime. A few steps away Alejandro Almanza Pereda's "Untitled (chest of drawers)" offers a different version of domesticity turned upside down. A bureau propped on a two-by-four high above the viewer's head suggests the precariousness of both the artist's life and the chaos of his native Mexico City.

Cayetana Carrión and Camila Valdeavellano's "Salmo's Memories," a video and installation of handmade puppets, draws on Peruvian literature and folklore; Anindita Dutta's striking "Brick Coffin" photographs depict her enacting her own death rites, recalling both traditional Indian practices and the work of Ana Mendieta; Manuel Acevedo's video excerpt from "The Albizu Project" takes inspiration from Pedro Albizu Campos, a crusader for Puerto Rican independence; and Yin Mei's video "Cursive: Ink/Paper/Body," finds the artist dancing with ink-covered legs over rice-paper, turning traditional Chinese calligraphy into a full-body performance.

Mr. Tam's co-curator is Jaishri Abichandani, whose art was in the first Queens biennial and who organized "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now" for the museum. Here she has a room devoted to women that demonstrates the complicated relationship among younger women, '70s feminism and craft-based art. Orly Genger's giant crocheted nylon climbing rope and Blanca Amezcua's embroidered panels exploring female sexuality hark back to "women's work" models, although neither artist would be likely to identify herself as a feminist.

Cultural collisions are also evident in the work of Judith Barry, a Long Island City art veteran whose "First and Third" video projections of immigrant narratives, first shown at the 1987 Whitney Biennial, confront viewers as they turn into various nooks and hallways of the museum. Paul Galloway's paintings of "Williamsburg Mormons" envision young missionaries hitting the big city and engaging in erotic rather than evangelizing activities. Amanda Sparks's elaborate pop-up book, "Half a World Away," is made of images found by Googling the phrase "typical American whiteness."

Where this exhibition can feel more provincial than shows like P.S. 1's "Greater New York" or the Whitney Biennial is in its attempt to balance the interests of the art crowd while staying "close to the heart of many local residents," according to its brochure. Sometimes these concerns dovetail nicely, as in Sophia Peer's quick-cut video "Everyday." She captures her aging parents moving around their cramped home in Queens like latter-day, empty-nest Bunkers burrowed in a row house amid a social landscape turned virtually unrecognizable.

At other times the Queens-centric strategy degenerates into what feels like small-town civic boosterism. "The World in a Picture/The World in a Borough," a show-within-the-show, features 37 local photographers and functions like a photo essay promoting -- as if this needs to be reiterated -- Queen's diversity. As in "Greater New York" and this year's Whitney Biennial, war is not left unaddressed by artists like Ms. Rahbar, Andrew Hur, Renzo Ortega, Jiyun Park and the collective Still Present Past. The museum's director, Tom Finkelpearl, even puts a Queens spin on it, arguing that the borough provides "a model for the world -- a mixing point for cultures without the ethnic hatreds that seem to be sweeping the globe."

But is Queens the new art world model?

This exhibition could be compared with the last installment of the Brooklyn Museum's "Open House: Working in Brooklyn," which showed 200 artists. Its curators estimated that 5,000 artists were living and working in Brooklyn in 2004. The first Queens biennial, Mr. Finkelpearl notes, drew 100 submissions and the second, 300. This year the pool grew to 500.

The work by emerging artists in "Open House" and Queens International is largely comparable, although a larger roster of better-known artists appeared in Brooklyn. But who knows? Maybe by 2008 or 2010 Queens will overtake Brooklyn, and give artists enjoying the affordability of the Bronx something to think about.

"Queens International 2006: Everything All at Once" is at the Queens Museum of Art, New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, through Jan. 14; (718) 592-9700.