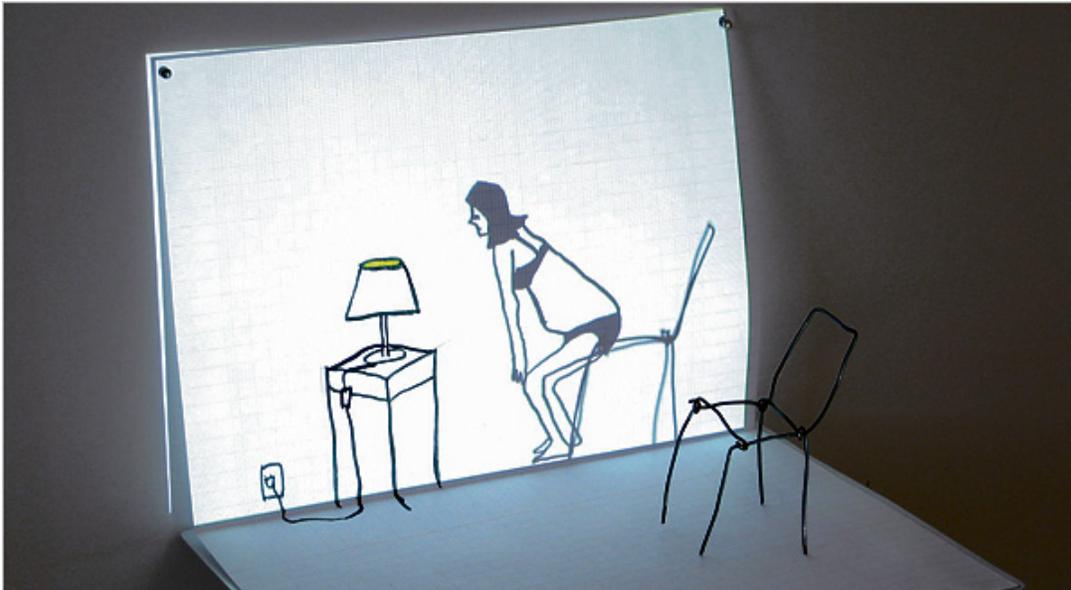


# The New York Times

July 25, 2008

ART REVIEW

## Artists Leap Into the Moment



"Living Room," 2008, drawn animation and wire, by Jeanne Verdoux. Courtesy of Jeanne Verdoux and The Bronx Museum of the Arts

By ROBERTA SMITH

Sometimes an art exhibition is just an art exhibition. If its focus is contemporary, it is also a mass of symptoms that reveal strengths or failings of the current art world.

"How Soon Is Now?" at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#) is almost nothing but symptoms reflecting almost nothing but failings. Yet this show of amateurish and derivative work by 36 emerging artists also says a lot about the competition among art mediums, the latest trickle-down trends in art making and the shortcomings of higher art education. In answer to the show's catchy title, for many of the artists here, "now" may never come.

"How Soon Is Now?" is the 28th version of the annual culmination of the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace, or AIM, program. It is held twice a year with 18 participants per session and is followed by a summer exhibition of work by the previous year's participants, who are chosen from about 600 applicants by a review panel of museum staff and AIM alumni. There is no age limit, but artists must live in the New

York metropolitan area and truly be emerging; they cannot have gallery representation. While they are participating in AIM, they cannot be enrolled in a degree-granting B.F.A. or M.F.A. program anywhere or in a similar “professional development program.”

The show is a cacophony of mediums, materials and styles. The only relief, initially, are a few paintings or painting-like objects. In this rather undifferentiated morass of feints at video, photography, sculpture and above all earnestly political, identity-based Conceptual Art, the paintings spring out like little oases of personal thought, concentration and effort. Some nonpainting efforts come into focus with time, but the first impression is a telling lesson in why painting doesn't die; it is at the very least a good way for young artists to grasp the kind of density of expression that any art medium requires. (It helps to remember that most of the first generation Conceptualists were educated and began their careers as painters.)

Giuseppe Luciani for example, uses oil on canvas to encapsulate the mundane views of backyards and buildings outside his Brooklyn apartment; his tough little compositions broadcast radiant color and brusque surfaces. They are stylistically similar to the work of better known contemporary painters, especially Sarah McEneaney, despite Mr. Luciani's statement that he is deliberately working in an “anachronistic” style. Blanka Amezkua appropriates the female protagonists from Mexican comic books, converting their fierce images into large, robust embroideries that exude a fiery formal wit without being overly beholden to [Roy Lichtenstein](#). Negar Ahkami's quirky fusion of figuration, feminism and Islamic patterning needs development, but it still stands out, as does Cosme Herrera's ambiguous landscape on routed and painted wood.

Perhaps an overfamiliarity with Conceptual Art and especially the theories it inspired can leave young artists with no sense of how to make an artwork that holds together as an experience. You can sense the lack of connection to either materials or self in their statements, which appear on the wall labels beside the work. They mix overblown, one-size-fits-all artspeak with quite a bit of wishful thinking about their work's impact, as if they could control the meaning or effect of their work. Different artists claim that their efforts “contend with codes of power, authority, race and class,” “question man-made constructs,” “challenge the anthropological categorizations of early photography” or “reveal the latent power of the public's collective intelligence.” A few statements manage to locate the art in the vicinity of the artist's life. “My work focuses on Pakistani-American social and cultural customs and growing up in a working class Muslim family,”

one artist says, a reminder that art comes from highly specific contexts. Unfortunately these words accompany a completely generic work involving the hair of the artist and her mother.

The most successful Conceptual Art here is made by Brian Lund, who reduces the action of movies to a shorthand of abstract scribbles, lines, dots and dashes, unleashed in colored pencil over dozens of file cards. The drawings are visually compelling, and once you learn their function — in this case one installment of the Rambo franchise is scored — you get a heightened sense of movies as a series of repeating conventions and codes, but also as a form of choreography.

Bill Lohre provides immediate sustenance for mind and eye with “Wet Spot,” which consists of a series of small painted wall reliefs that you quickly realize depict the aftermath of [Hurricane Katrina](#). Above, little cutouts of white men in suits are safe and dry. Below, shattered houses, debris, and people of color are buffeted by bright blue waves. Mustering the shortest, most to-the-point statement, Mr. Lohre says his work “is about sculpting and commenting at the same time.”

Jeanne Verdoux’s three tiny wall pieces make effective use of the slightest and smallest of line drawings. The best, “Living Room,” could be an animated New Yorker cartoon. A projection repeatedly shows a pregnant woman in her underwear rising from her chair and switching on a lamp. Two cones of yellow light appear and the scene goes dark, revealing that while the woman and her lamp are drawn animation, her chair is made of real wire attached to a shallow shelf.

Keliy Anderson-Staley makes tintypes of her friends that seem to hark from the past, like the people in [Chuck Close](#)’s daguerreotypes. Si Jae Byun makes a playful stop-action video involving a shoe adrift on a sea of tulle and then surrounds it with a pointless tulle-heavy installation. Irys Schenker joins the legions of artists making endearing dollhouse-like rooms, and hers are endearing too. And Emcee C. M., who may or may not be a collective, has built a funky, garrulous community center on wheels. It includes a popcorn maker and a movie projector and reflects how the once radical ideas of artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rirkrit Tiravanija are now conventions.

Not much else here will slow you down. It does give me pause that 26 of the 36 artists have master’s degrees in fine arts from respected universities or art schools. I think most

of them should ask for their money back. On the evidence here, at least, they have only a meager understanding of what being an artist entails.

“How Soon Is Now?” suggests that there is no point in spending time on “professional development” or learning how to advance one’s work in the marketplace if artistic development is not well under way. That requires lots of long, hard looking at all kinds of art, in all mediums, from all periods and cultures. Aspiring artists need to expose themselves to the sheer intensity and variety of art, to learn what they love, what they hate and if they are actually artists at all. New York’s galleries and especially its great museums offer ample opportunity for this kind of self-education, which leads to self-knowledge. Anything is possible when artists set to work knowing they have something they urgently need to say, in a way it hasn’t quite been said before.

*“How Soon Is Now?” is on view through Aug. 18 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania, (718) 681-6000, [bronxmuseum.org](http://bronxmuseum.org).*