Singular Work, Double Bind, Triple Threat

By Carrie Rickey


The glossary. Singular work: Instead of a collective sensibility, there’s a collection of one-person shows. Nowhere is this truer than in the work of the taxonomists of style, continue to mount group shows, inventing avant-garde connections among a group of singular works, because it seems the only sensible way to organize the chaos.

Double bind: the no-win situation of the (sexual, ethnic, regional, racial) majority artist whose work is invariably the target of crossfire. If the art exhibits a specifically sexual, ethnic, racial, or regional characteristic, it gets attacked as parochial, or, worse, treated as exotic, a euphemism for artworld ghetto. If the art does not exhibit a specifically sexual, ethnic, racial, or regional characteristic, the activist consciousness of that particular minority criticizes it for not selling their preconceived notion of the minority aesthetic to White Male Manhattan Modernism, or, worse, White Male Manhattan Modernism condemns it as inauthentic because it doesn’t correspond to their preconceived notion of a minority aesthetic.

Triple threat: the dicey combination of the singular work with the double bind, for instance, Afro-American Abstraction, wherein curator April Kingsley brings together the work of 29 artists, some well-known, some unknown, all of whom are subtly read: not always visibly) under the influence of African traditional cultures. A terrific exhibition, if you overlook two offensive curatorial defenses.

Strangely, Kingsley validates the theme by recalling, in her introduction to the show, that: “Seventy years ago African art was a major source for Modernism, so most contemporary art can be said to have been indirectly influenced by it.” Just because Picasso and Matisse were moved by the impact of African sculpture is no reason to connect them—European colonials circa 1906 delighting in exotic artifacts—with black Americans circa 1980 celebrating their African heritage. This is work to be taken seriously not because of Bure or Cubist authorization but by its hybology done in ceramic, and instead of castings of body parts, there are neatly bound terra cotta figure capsulized with relief motifs. This is the signature of African ceramic relief grids, combing them as do a knowing minimalism with instinctual experiences which combine art savvy with craft tactility.

Melvin Edwards: Hardly the cahouze of description. The Smith-Carlin show of sculptural collages, Mel’s Edwards: In Search of the Studio, chains, and bolts are tough, compressed constructions, and tense as an overwound spring. In the elevated structure of the material, the tension of their fusion combine to make a violent and dynamic juxtaposition of decorative elements. Edwards’ work has anything to do with black art, everything else with living in the U.S.A.

Successful painter of this or any exhibition, Gilliam, like Ron Gorchov, has moved from expressionist abstractions to the images of a shaped canvas, protruding and asymmetric. I read these constructions as shielded or deflected edges (Gilliam already tried to negate it, letting his freeform, unstretched paintings billow off the wall) with most of the most intensely shadowed surfaces scored. What does he have to do with African heritage? Beats me...

David Hammons: My favorite piece in the show, Hammons’ “Victory over Sin,” is a room-installation. Stenciled on the wall amidst a wall of paired kidney shapes apparently excising each site. On the floor, a congestion of metal reeds, lint, emanating from their stalks. The sin? Sexual longing. The Victory? Consummation. Theoretically, this work is close to Cynzia’s work, since it is of an entirely different order. Both Cynzia and Hammons turn an environment, but Hamilton is better with the architectural detail. Hammons with the metaphorical item.

Maren Hassinger: An exciting obsession with the life of Jackie Winsor, is obvious in Hassinger’s bound sheaves of wire filaments, which hang in a grid like the products of a harvester. Unlike, Hassinger’s diaspora is one of contrasting the organic with the fabricated. Richard Hunt: His metal sculptures have the European elegance of a Julio Gonzales or an Umberto Boccioni, but it’s Hunt’s meticulous, etchings in the metal—drawn landscapes—that are unexpected showstoppers. His drawings on copper are, suggesting other means of reproduction.

Howardena Pindell: Like Marcel Duchamp, Pindell isn’t content with “retro” analysis of the art object. Her village/constructions of paper and such have an added sensory appeal—they’re olfactables. She’s the sculpture of a Black Brazilian deity, this, the most gorgeous piece in the show, has all the resonant formal and materials and—what with its pastel particolored and glitter surface.

Martin Puryear: Quietly elegant, beautifully constructed, his work hangs on the wall—two perfect bracelets. Possibly the most meticulous artist on the current black scene, the meaning of his woodwork is consistent, but his fastidiousness is. The precision of his wooden bracelet and totems, their sinuous, attenuating ends, hang the gracefulness of a Texan, a one-person movement, Puryear accepts the nature of the materials to make sense.

William T. Williams: “The Taxi Dancers,” Williams’ sectional painting inverted, the same poetic architecture, the breaking rhythm of hieroglyphic characters activating its surface. Painted in warm color, this canvas has affinities with Africa, the work is a kind of Exultant of Event Painting. Truly the best of all possible worlds from a minimalist-turn