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ART REVIEW

A Full Studio Museum Show Starts With 28 Young Artists and a Shoehorn

By HOLLAND COTTER

Spring in New York usually brings a museum survey of new art. Such shows don't have to be "great"; they seldom are. But if they're good, they deliver a hint of newness and promise that the commercial art world, month by month, can only sporadically muster. Sometimes a Whitney Biennial fills the bill; last year it was "Greater New York." This spring "Freestyle," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, is the showcase to see.

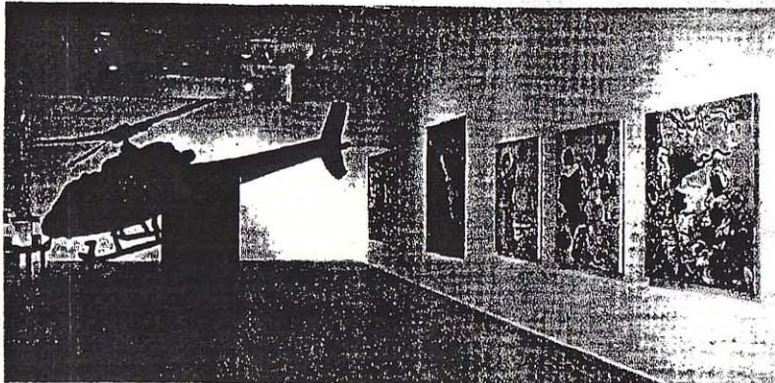
It comes with high expectations and a built-in restriction. As everyone knows, the museum is under new management. Thelma Golden, formerly of the Whitney, heads the curatorial team. She's alert and ambitious, and her take on where art is heading tends to be ahead of the curve. "Freestyle," which includes 28 young or youngish African-American artists from across the country, is her show.

She's brought some smart thinking to it, distilled in her introduction to the exhibition catalog. There she uses the term "post-black art" to suggest the show's curatorial bias, referring to work by artists "adamant about not being labeled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness." This dynamic of rejection and embrace is elusive and complex, as Ms. Golden acknowledges. It is also very much of the present American moment, and it offers a fascinating lens through which to filter the show.

As if to take some of the heat off her first major project as the museum's deputy director and curator of exhibitions, Ms. Golden has kept the proceedings casual, low-key, unencumbered by rigid themes to live up to or live down. After a year or so of studio visits, she picked the artists — 11 women, 17 men — and more or less handed the museum's space over to them.

Space is where the restriction comes in. The museum is undergoing a physical expansion, to be completed in 2003. (A new bookstore-gift shop is already open.) Until then, space is tight. Even 28 artists with a piece or two each is a squeeze, and a curator can move things around in just so many ways. As a result, parts of the show feel cramped and patchy, and the work doesn't have the impact it should. It's best to take "Freestyle" as a loose assemblage, an anthology of individual styles and sensibilities, some more interesting and assertive than others, going in

"Freestyle" remains at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500, through June 24.



Photographs by Adam Reich/The Studio Museum in Harlem

"Freestyle," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, features African-American artists from around the country. The show is Thelma Golden's first major project as the museum's deputy director and curator of exhibitions.

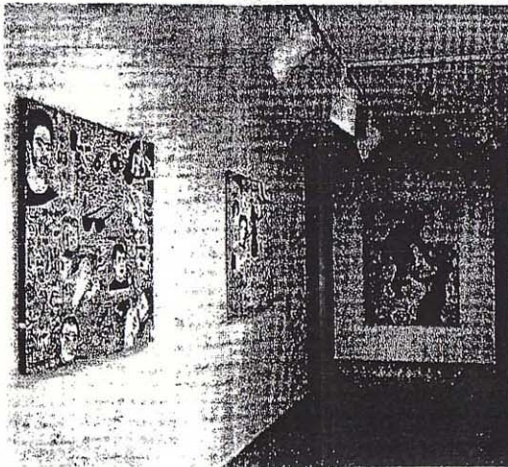
different directions.

You get the picture as soon as you walk in the door. Photographs of flames — fires of inspiration? burning crosses? — by the Brooklyn artist Rico Gatson flicker on one lobby wall. Three large-format portraits by the 24-year-old photographer Rashid Johnson hang on another. Hand-brushed with mineral pigments to rich old master sheen, their subject is a homeless man the artist met in Chicago.

An overhead sound piece by Nadine Robinson blends political speeches by George W. Bush and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with laugh tracks. (Ms. Robinson, born in London, lives and works in the Bronx. She's a find.) A snappy video by Susan Smith-Pinelo offers a continuous closeup of the artist's cleavage in a low-cut dress moving to the rhythm of Michael Jackson's "Working Night and Day," as a gold necklace spelling "ghetto" bounces across her chest.

So there's a lot cooking: humor, anger, class, race, art history, new technology, formal beauty, with no ingredient in anything like a pure form. The mix continues in the main gallery where, in a nice symbolic touch, the installation opens with photographs by the Haitian-born Adler Guerrier of empty airport waiting rooms, ready for arrivals and takeoffs.

Two Los Angeles artists come next. The biggest piece in the show, a wall painting of a police helicopter done in hair pomade, is by Kori Newkirk. He also contributes a Romantic nocturnal landscape, fashioned from strings of colored plastic hair beads, of a city skyline touched by fire or sunset light: urban vio-



lence, the Sublime and Venus Williams meet.

Mark S. Bradford makes his New York debut with a pair of beautiful abstract paintings, their surfaces covered with edge-to-edge rectangular bits of paper forming linear grids. The effect brings Agnes Martin and Helen Gallagher to mind. The applied scraps are perm endpapers used in hairdressing. Mr. Bradford collects them in the South Central Los Angeles beauty salon where he works as a stylist.

Painting accounts for about half the show, and it takes many forms. Narrative is one, often in the mocking-genuous guise of cartoon fantasy. Among the outstanding examples

ing nightly calls to far-flung places: Uganda, Israel, the Seychelles. The piece evokes a drama of obsessive amorous pursuit. It also serves as a reminder — drawings of African sculptures by Arnold J. Kemp make the same point — of the museum's recent emphasis on expanding its core African-American identity to include the wider African diaspora and Africa itself.

Ms. Okudzeto combines language and image. So do the paintings of Trenton Doyle Hancock, with their layers of cut-out, mantralike phrases, and those of Deborah Grant, a Harlem resident who has exhibited infrequently. Her two entries, packed with images (guns, celebrities, cartoons), peppered with phrases and pictographs, are the visual equivalent of a static-filled talk-radio station turned on loud. Remarkable in themselves, they hint at the impact on younger artists of proto-"post-black" artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Glenn Ligon, who is showing breakthrough new work at D'Amelio Terras in Chelsea this month.

Abstract works other than Mr. Bradford's — floor pieces by Louis Cameron and Jerald Jean's biomorphic paintings — gain interest from the "Freestyle" context. They are reminders of earlier generations of African-American abstract artists who have yet to get their due. And abstraction takes on a kind of cool, new cosmic poetry in Julie Mehretu's drawings, where colored forms drift over panoramas of quaking landscapes and splintered architecture. (Ms. Mehretu, a star on the rise, is one of the museum's three artists-in-residence this year, along with Ms. Okudzeto and Ms. Robinson.)

Although painting is definitely center stage in the show, there's strong work in other media. Clifford Owens contributes three short, sexy videos, one involving an erotic encounter with a futon. Sanford Biggers, collaborating with Jennifer Zackin, has a charming piece that pairs 1970's home movies of two middle-class families, one African-American, one white. The recorded events are virtually identical.

And the Jamaica-born Dave McKenzie comes through with a jazzily syncopated film in which he twists, flips, rocks and rolls with spastic abandon outside a convenience store. Is this performance art? Dance? Acting out? Yes. It's great.

Vincent Johnson, 45, the show's senior artist, is also one of its small handful of photographers: his grainy views of his native Cleveland look like surreptitious shots of a war zone. Kira Lynn Harris's diaphanous photographs are similarly stylized but have a soft, soaked-in glow; they're pictures of an abstract, light-reflective architectural installation she put together at Smack Mellon Studios in

Brooklyn last summer.

"Freestyle" has a few installations of its own, including Camille Norment's walk-in black vinyl padded room — a cross between a jail cell and a meditation chamber — and a memorable, though easy-to-pass-by wall piece by Jennie C. Jones. Titled "Homage to an Unknown Suburban Black Girl," it sets an enlarged found snapshot of a soft-faced, afro-coiffed child within a Mondrian-style geometric grid, as if asking what her life and modernist utopias have to do with each other.

The show's one interactive digital entry, a funny, polished, seriously angry sendup of online marketing by Tana Hargest, points to links between stalled political change and

An anthology of 'post-black art' includes varied sensibilities.

the lulling effects of consumer culture. Eric Wesley's "Mall," a tabletop sculpture of fastidiously hand-made junk food packaging, touches on this theme. (The piece uncannily resembles Frank Gehry's design for the Wall Street Guggenheim.) So does Adia Millett's dollhouse-size apartment building furnished with its miniature bassinets and bedside pistols. Here the American dream and disaster, home and the world, are separated by the thinnest of walls.

"Freestyle" — which has been coordinated at the Studio Museum by Christine Y. Kim, a curatorial assistant — is trying, in its laid-back, just-a-first-draft way, to kick through some of those walls and see what happens. It suggests recasting the notion of what "black art" means in a country, a neighborhood, even an art world where racial balances are shifting. In the process, it rethinks, but doesn't abandon, the identity politics that drove much of the advanced art of the past 20 years.

This is important stuff. Maybe that's why there's a sense that the best artists in the show — along with the young curators, scholars and critics who contribute to its slender but spacy catalog — are operating beyond the level of conceptual noodling that seems to be endemic at present. They're actually talking about something — life — and we're sure to be hearing from many of them again soon.