

WHAT'S GOING ON? DAWOUD BEY'S BLOG

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A Couple of Thoughts in/on Passing: Rona Pondick and Roy DeCarava



A Sublime Experience in Worcester, MA

I had the opportunity during an unusually busy month to catch the curated exhibition project by sculptor Rona Pondick. The exhibition closed on October 11th, a Sunday, which is precisely the day a friend—Addison Gallery's Julie Bernson—and I made our way to the Worcester Art Museum from Waltham via Boston, MA. Having long admired Pondick's work I had been wanting to see this exhibition since hearing about it when it opened. The closing date had thus remained solidly fixed in my brain during the run of the show. It proved to have been well worth the trip and then some.

I've written previously about how museums and artists can each reinvent their respective roles through placing the artist in more of a directly engaging conversation with institutional space. Traditionally we think of the museum space as a place where selected artists' works are exhibited. We don't often think of placing artists in positions of responsibility to actually determine what is exhibited in that space, particularly if it's not just their own work. Such activity is generally the purview of curators, those persons charged with articulating and visualizing the museum's *raison d'être* or conceptual mission through its exhibition program. As in any profession there is a set of knowledge and skills required which generally are gained through both academic training and experience. An advance art history degree usually figures in there somewhere, but certainly not always. Encyclopedic or historical museums tend to have a more fixed professional track than contemporary institutions. I've known and worked with both curators and museum directors who have come to their positions in several different ways and all have attained a measure of success, working successfully in a wide range of museum contexts. Either way, it is the decisions of these curators--in some consultation with the directors--that come to define the institution's public face

and identity. It is a position of great institutional and public trust and, one might add, power.



Generally speaking power is too often something that those who have worked to acquire it are loathe to share. The long arc of history generally confirms that those who don't share power, amassing it shamelessly and in a self serving manner, are eventually done in by it in some way. That goes for institutions as well.

Institutions—public ones in particular like museums—generally operate within a framework of what we might call socialized power, that is the power to benefit others, in their case by collecting and presenting the best or most interesting visual aspects of culture for public appreciation and study. The question, then, of who is allowed to shape this viewing experience becomes an ever more loaded one, one in which the museum has an opportunity to redefine itself through how it chooses to answer these questions. And I am one who believes that the current climate of economic instability and shifting social change creates a ripe opportunity for museums to take a second look at how they view themselves, the artists they exhibit, the audiences they serve and the configurations these entities might then be placed in.



Rona Pondick's exhibition, "Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object," at the Worcester Art Museum is an example of the best that can result from this reconsideration of traditional roles within the museum, i.e artists exhibit and curators curate, and what can happen when an institution shares its curatorial and institutional power with an artist. The result of a conversation began several years ago between Pondick and the Worcester's curator of contemporary art Susan Stoops, the exhibition is one in which Pondick juxtaposes her own sculptures with those from the museum's collection spanning a broad historical range. As Pondick has said, *"I want to look at how sculpture is physical and how the*

physical makes psychological impact. Viewers have conscious and unconscious visceral responses to objects that they feel in their own bodies and that make psychological meaning. I am interested in looking at the way the psychological

has been manifested in sculptures from all periods. When these different historic sculptures and mine are installed next to one another, there is a visual communication spoken in "body language" that needs little explanation. The sculptures start losing their historical place and take on more physical, emotional, and visceral relations with the viewer. Gestures and postures don't translate solely into symbolic interpretations particular to a culture or time period. Otherwise, why would people look at historic work?" This statement marks, too, the clarity and acuity with which Pondick has conceptualized and executed the project.

I'm not one to use the term flawless too often, but this exhibition came as close to that as anything I've seen in recent memory. The relational intricacies created through the placement of the sculptures enhanced the viewer's ability to draw connections and allusions between them and made for a joyously provocative installation. The shape and placement of the various pedestals allowed the viewer to move easily and revealingly around each group of sculptures to full effect, permitting one to view the objects as needed to full three dimensional and narrative effect, with all of the subtly revealed allusions clearly explicated throughout the installation. Pondick's spare wall text was almost subliminal in its measured ability to point to her ideas and motivations while leaving ample room for the viewer's own experience and discovery. Didactic wall text it was not. I found myself smiling quietly and laughing broadly at the brilliance of it all as I walked repeatedly around the room. The reverberations between her exquisitely realized hybrid like contemporary sculptures and the historical works were wonderfully and variously nuanced, creating--as she intended--a much expanded reading of each. Indeed Pondick's own sculptures contain within them a wealth of references regarding her use of contrasting representational forms and surface finish. The exhibition suggested to me the very best of what one might hope for in handing an artist the curatorial reins.

http://www.worcesterart.org/Exhibitions/rona_pondick.html

The experience of the Pondick project was only further heightened when my friend and I followed it up with a visit to the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College where Kiki Smith was holding forth in a curated exhibition project there entitled "Cut from her Breast" as part of the Museum's "The Permanent Collection: The Artist-as-Curator: Kiki Smith." The museum's pr materials describe the project as such, *"Smith's presentation of these works of art is a departure from the typical aesthetics of museum display. By inviting artists to curate selections from the collection, the Davis Museum hopes to expand upon the ways in which works of art are experienced and interpreted. As museums increasingly call attention to how the display of objects encodes and constructs meaning, Smith has joined a growing number of artists sought after as curators."*

This sounds to me a bit like a "sought after artist sweepstake" than an invitation to any deep and meaningful institutional engagement. And I would suggest that what the Davis "won" was the use of Kiki Smith's name, certainly not an expanded experience of the objects from their collection for their visitors, since there is virtually no clearly discernible discursive context in which to meaningfully engage with these wide ranging objects. The installation consists of

vessels from different cultures and periods placed in display cases that Smith designed (which I believe I recall her saying had some relation to the cases in which her family kept their wine.) In the entrance of the gallery Smith hung a beautiful 18th century Mexican ex-voto of a woman undergoing a mastectomy. First making a reproduction of this painting, Smith then proceeded to cut bits of the painting, reproduced on paper, into irregular rectangular shapes and then place them in various irregular locations within the cases containing each vessel. Several low hanging bare light bulbs complete the vaguely aestheticized affect. The relationship between the painting and the vessels? The relationship between the fractured pieces of the ex-voto and their placement in the display cases? The light bulbs?

Unfortunately no interpretive material or even minimal wall text was available to help unravel that particular conceptual riddle, though Smith did look rather thoughtful in the video as she cut out the shapes and placed adhesive on them before affixing them to the insides of the cases and other talking heads held forth in an appropriately academically jargonistic fashion. I even noticed a few rectangular pieces of the reproduced painting affixed to window of the gallery. It all had an oddly rushed and sadly "phoned in" feeling to it that made me want to rush back to Worcester to again immerse myself in what a truly engaged and dialogical project looks like, one in which the artist has her own intense conversation with the objects and the museum and then invites the viewer to participate in the ensuing conversation.

Like all situations of public presentation, an exhibition is an opportunity for the artist to either fail very publicly or for their ideas and work to take hold in the imagination. It is no different when institutions choose to put artists behind the curatorial steering wheel. In the best cases—my own project at the Walters, Vik Muniz's "Rebus" project at MoMA and Pondick's Worcester project would qualify I believe—it becomes an expanded aesthetic and institutional conversation, one that presents a set of choices that emerge out of a serious engagement between all parties. The artist, the institution and the viewers are thus all the better for it.