

Sculpture May 2005

Nari Ward, Deitch Projects

By Michael Amy

Nari Ward constructs his sculpture mostly from discarded objects. His open approach to materials leads to startling juxtapositions, and his ambiguous message touches on poverty, politics, and identity. As an artist from Jamaica who lives and works in Harlem, Ward confronts these issues on a daily basis.

The most striking work in his recent exhibition, "St. Peter's Odyssey Salon," was *Reading Room*, which combines scent, sound, and strong visuals. In this ensemble, the tops of a long, wooden table and of 12 surrounding stools are covered with coarse salt and pieces of dried codfish laid out in symmetrical patterns somewhat reminiscent of Early Christian "opus sectile" floors. Each stool sits in front of a large folio taken from the catalogue of early Italian paintings in the Robert Lehman collection—the pages themselves are framed, each place setting contained within a glass and aluminum case balanced on top of two cans of Parrot: Sweetened Condensed Filled Dairy Product. Situated in the bare, brick basement of the gallery, the work exuded spiritual meaning. The catalogue spreads show black and white reproductions of Madonna and Child paintings by the likes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Sana di Pietro, and Giovanni Bellini, accompanied by written entries, which are read out loud by Ward in English and Jamaican patois. The 12 stools, in conjunction with the table, may refer to the Last Supper. Christ is represented as a child in the reproductions and perhaps symbolized by the pieces of fish embedded in salt. Mary's role as nurturer is referred to by the reproductions and by the cans' dairy contents, which are sweet, like the Virgin's milk. The poverty of the early Church is alluded to by the starkness of the handmade furniture.

Another table, of thick, soiled Plexiglas, formerly served as a large desk for office workers on the top floor of the gallery. *Naturalization Drawing Room* includes INS Naturalization Application Forms covered with dense linear abstract drawings displayed upright between Plexiglas panels. Having decided to apply for American citizenship, Ward has mixed feelings about the process, especially in light of the political and social upheavals in the U.S. following 9/11. Heightened nationalistic fervor and growing intolerance have hit immigrants hard. In another work, Ward, who has a great sense of humor, suggests a way of burning Old Glory into one's skin. *Glory* is composed of three beat-up oil barrels, which are soldered together, placed on their sides, and split lengthwise so that the top half can be raised to reveal a tanning bed covered with a Stars and Stripes pattern. Branding carries alternatively playful or painful resonances for a black man: black people have little use for tanning beds, but historically their skin was seared by the branding iron, marking them as slaves. A maze consisting of white towels suspended from strings and decorated with slabs of tar—perhaps alluding to charred pieces of skin—led to the tanning salon.

At the entrance to the gallery stood three sculptures from the "Copulation Works" series, built from sawed-up wood doors, rubber roofing membrane, and feather bales. Although these works resemble precariously balanced lifeboats pieced together by refugees, the geometrically reconfigured doors reference couples performing sexual acts on top of a feather bed, as the titles *Doggy*, *69*, and *Missionary* suggest. These sculptures are covered with sticky motifs created by inserting slowly melting lollipops into holes drilled into the doors and applying flat black geometric rubber forms onto the wood and the feather bales. The lollipops introduce the idea of sucking and licking, playfully reinforcing the abstract erotic charge, which unfolds under the watchful eye of the *Holy Ghost*, a huge geometric wall drawing executed with silver marker on roofing membrane. Behind this drawing, the backs of over 300 television sets projected from another wall to create a huge horizontal rectangular relief sculpture, *Air Plane Tears*, a meditation on mass consumerism and the media. Ward's work, though rough in appearance, can be deeply engaging.