

ART;
Painting With Peanut Butter and Jelly

By William Zimmer

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RAFAEL SANCHEZ, who divides his time between Jersey City and Paris, is a master of ephemera. With him the term loses its connotation of slightness; instead it refers to a glittering apparition, but one concocted out of homespun material. In the small gallery of the Jersey City Museum, he has created an installation that evokes a trip to the Poconos.

The installation is humorous and slyly satirical as it comments on - and improves upon -- the pungent kitsch that has lured tourists to the Poconos for generations. It is respectful, and the proof of this is that Mr. Sanchez has fashioned some alluring objects out of "indigenous" materials, like the sculpture with the grand title "Faith and Reason," which is made out of large seashells, a straw cornucopia and a light bulb.

During a tour of this room, there is an occasion in which the viewer is sure he is witnessing the equivalent of one of the seven wonders of the world: a wall of abstract patterns based on the hex signs that adorn barns in Pennsylvania. But Mr. Sanchez's signs are painted with peanut butter and strawberry jelly, as in "Flat Jack." (The foods are laid thickly on the canvas and then varnished.) These paintings sound the primary note of enchantment that echoes throughout the installation.

The show also includes a floral pattern made with green vinyl stickers on fake wood paneling and two pedestals that have the force of shrines. One pedestal holds a jar of Vicks Vaporub, and the other a pile of cedar chips. These are contrasting odors that could summon up remembrances of things past.

Mr. Sanchez's French connection figures in through a photograph of an installation he created in the catacombs beneath Montparnasse Cemetery. The gilded human femur in this picture might have a Poconos relative in terms of archeology.

Mr. Sanchez's work is nostalgia of a high order. Along with slight items like a painted bandanna or a polyhedron made of wooden Q-Tips is a wood cabinet with glass shelves that are themselves strewn with broken glass. This is an emblematic work that declares that the installation commemorates broken dreams.

If time spent in Mr. Sanchez's installation is like sinking into a warm bath, the group show organized by Gwen Stokes that is the main offering at the Jersey City Museum requires that viewers have all their wits about them. It is called "Evidence," and this can be taken to signify that an artwork may have a deep message, more than what is on the surface.

MARTOS GALLERY

An umbrella idea like this means that a wide variety of art can be offered up, and the show includes painting, sculpture and photography. The photographic evidence is the clearest: the Irish photographer Paul Graham makes panoramic Cibachrome prints of his country, but they bear grim titles like "Army Helicopter and Observation Post" or "Army Stop and Search."

A close look reveals that the beauty of the scene is marred by incidents of war, including a soldier in camouflage, angry graffiti or what might mean something benign in another context, a Union Jack in a tree.

In large watercolors, Masami Teraoka, who lives in San Francisco, mimics the look of classic Japanese woodcuts. He is especially skilled at rendering lively water in the manner of Hokusai. But nothing is serene here. Mr. Teraoka's protagonists struggle with octopuses depicted in full detail. Wrapped condoms floating in the water alert us to the idea that the creature is a metaphor for AIDS.

Robert Younger makes sculpture out of wood and plaster primarily, and other materials adorn his constructions. Sometimes the materials fool us. Two beehive shapes painted yellow look as though they are meant to be hung up by the attached wire coat hangers, but experience cautions that the pieces are too heavy to lift.

Viewers are bidden to compose narratives. Is that large oval atop his life-size dresser a pill aimed at a giant headache? There is no doubt that viewers are to think of a sawmill in another sculpture; witness the plaster disk that is the blade and the bucket filled halfway up with rubber gloves.

Mr. Younger can also find clues in current events. One of his pieces is a jerry-built Scud missile.

Gerald Nichols's paintings resemble eye charts and provide something to decode. The letters of the alphabet themselves have their properties as abstract shapes exaggerated, so viewers have to interpret the letters before tackling the message.

The work is often rewarding, as in "Abracadabra (Incantation Against Calamity)." According to tradition, each time the incantation is recited, a syllable drops off. In a nice bit of visual poetry, Mr. Nichols depicts the disintegrating word as slipping through an hourglass.

Both exhibitions are on view through Feb. 1.

The Jersey City Museum is on the fourth floor of the Main Library on the corner of Jersey Avenue and Montgomery Street. It is open Tuesday through Saturday 10:30 A.M. to 5 P.M., with hours extended to 8 P.M. Wednesday.