

Christopher Knight, "Art Review: Natalie Bookchin at LACE." Los Angeles Times, March 22, 2012

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Art review: Natalie Bookchin at LACE

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A murmuring 18-channel video installation by Natalie Bookchin at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions is an affecting meditation on perceptions of race, specifically concerning African American men. The subject is socially, politically and emotionally fraught, and its charged complexity is prone to artistic treatments that are rote or sentimental. Bookchin deftly avoids those traps.

The video installation comes from a documentary tradition. Documentaries are always socially minded, and this work does not turn away from grim realities; they include statements and assumptions by and about fellow human beings -- black, white, Asian and Latino; male and female; young, middle-aged and old --that can make you wince. But it is the opposite of sensationalist. Instead, the Los Angeles artist fashions a slowly unfolding, non-linear narrative that quietly haunts the imagination.

Absorbing the installation takes time, since the initial encounter is disorienting. The large rear gallery at LACE is dark, with 18 flat-screen monitors suspended in space around the room. At any given moment, most of the screens are also dark; intermittently they light up in dispersed groups of two, three or more with brief bursts of talking heads -- sometimes ranting, sometimes questioning, always earnest.

At first you find yourself ricocheting around the room like a human pinball, trying to catch glimpses of people and snippets of conversation that will articulate a lucid theme. The entire installation appears to run on a loop, which repeats every 15 minutes or so; eventually, a viewer hooked on provocative bits of audio and visual information and wanting to grasp more begins to slow down. Then the piece starts to churn, washing over a more stationary viewer like a fitful media shower.

The installation is composed from scores of clips Bookchin gathered from Internet video-logs -- vlogs -- a form of Web television in which ordinary individuals with a desire to speak their minds choose to address a wide variety of subjects, serious and frivolous alike. Vlogs couldn't be more different in form and content from the buttoned-down, sleekly produced commercial entertainments of corporate TV news and public affairs programs.

A video camera is set up in a person's den, bedroom or even bathroom, or at the kitchen table. Sometimes there's an artfully chosen backdrop, such as an attractive view out the window, a sober home-office bookshelf or a dutiful American flag. More often, nothing special defines or decorates the locale. The scene is set as Anywhere, U.S.A.

What Bookchin looked for in selecting clips was vloggers talking about black men in the news. These protagonists are never simply identified. In the installation-collage, however, their identities emerge as fragmented subjects the way they might in a Weimar-era graphic by John Heartfield or Hannah Höch.

Golfer Tiger Woods, rapper Chris Brown, President Barack Obama, singer Michael Jackson -- these are African American men we know almost entirely through mass media. That imagery has been created, manipulated and presented both by and about them, but the public is always its consumer.

Vlogging turns the consumer into a producer. Barely more than a decade old as a medium and more unfettered than anything on the nightly network or cable news, it possesses at least the potential for vast reach. Vlogs feature voices that can be as maddening, insightful, surprising or inane as any highly paid anchor or correspondent reading from a prepared script.

Given Bookchin's chosen media subjects, however, a grinding friction is generated between mass media and its newly personal counterpart. What's compelling about her refined handling of the material is the clarity of its homemade qualities, which contrasts sharply with its commercial counterparts.

These DIY television commentators say the darnedest things. Some utterances will curl your toes, while their occasional repetition from different, unrelated mouths points back to the already mediated information these individuals have already consumed:

"I'm not trying to be racist, I'm just stating a fact." "Always looking for a messiah!"

"You see a black guy, you think..." "There's a time and a place to show your blackness." "I love black people, I think they're cool. But..."

There's something incantatory about it, as if the spoken observations conceal much more than they reveal. These are men and women with something to say about African American men, and though they say it with conviction, Bookchin's editing and composition together transform firm beliefs into a larger picture of doubt, uncertainty and -- most powerfully -- human yearning.

Judgments soon fall away -- judgments both from and about those who are speaking -- only to be replaced by something more moving and frankly touching. The insistence driving these snippets of video

rhetoric, their emphatic assertions of truth in the face of sometimes overwhelming vexation uncovers a rumbling undercurrent of frustration and even subtle desperation. A profound alienation emerges.



These marooned speakers reflect their presumed audiences, sitting at home alone in front of a computer monitor. At LACE, that reflection shatters.

The gathering of multiple images yields a jolt of socialization that reverberates through the gallery. An Internet mash-up between private and public describes the condition shared by anonymous vlogger and famous (or infamous) subject, as well as by any visiting LACE patron. Bookchin's installation is titled "Now he's out in public and everyone can see," but that sword is clearly double- and even triple-edged: It characterizes the speaker, the subject and the viewer.

Appropriation of existing imagery is obviously at work here. However, Bookchin approaches vlogs more the way a sculptor might approach products on store shelves, refuse in a dumpster and material left at the side of a road or washed up at the seashore. These are found objects. She artfully juxtaposes and carefully reassembles them to coax forth poetry.

She's been using the montage technique for a while -- perhaps most notably in "Mass Ornament," a stand-out in a 2009 group show at the Municipal Art Gallery. Hundreds of solo dance-vignettes performed by kids at home were lifted from YouTube and set to Depression-era soundtracks clipped from two extravagant 1935 films -- Busby Berkeley's Hollywood-produced "Gold Diggers" and Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-commissioned "Triumph of the Will." Part of the work, at once thrilling and heartbreaking, can be seen in a segment posted on Vimeo, the popular vlogging site whose name is an anagram of the word "movie" and that likes to say it puts the "me" in "video."

Although America's current president is only a bit-player in "Now he's out in public and everyone can see," the installation at LACE is plainly framed within the Age of Obama and the racial stresses and strains coursing through American life. They are especially acute in the midst of this unprecedented election season. Bookchin's poignant show is relatively modest, but its painful implications are unabashed.

"Natalie Bookchin: Now he's out in public and everyone can see," LACE, 6522 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 957-1777, through April 15. Closed Mon. and Tue. www.welcometolace.org

Photos: Natalie Bookchin, "Now he's out in public and everyone can see" (details), 2012, video installation. Credit: LACE.