Materials and Maids
OAS Rethinks Space, Society with ‘Traveling Light,’ ‘Common Place’

by Fresia Rodriguez

Space and innovative interpretation are the powerful overachieving themes that hold two separate exhibits together at the Art Museum of the Americas at the Organization of American States.

“Traveling Light, Five Artists from Chile,” curated by Laura Rouet, presents a diverse series of site-specific installations that center on themes of materials in contemporary art. “Common Place,” conceived by artists Justine Graham and Ruby Rumié, attempts to expose the complexities that oftentimes exist between Latin America housekeepers and their housewife employers. Both exhibits were organized in collaboration with the Embassy of Chile and while drastically different, their setup and presentation is complementary and allows for seamless compatibility and walkthrough.

“Traveling Light,” with its airy feel, features five contemporary Chilean artists who installed five dramatically unique site-specific works at the museum that explore the concepts of architectural, historic and illusionist space. The exhibit is named after their mode of travel. Artists “traveled light” because they were “shipped” as opposed to their artwork — that is the artists traveled to the museum by themselves and had to seek out their medium to translate their respective visions. Their materials, ranging from paint, plaster, string and glitter, were all purchased in the Washington area. While in D.C., the artists also worked with a group of students from the Corcoran College of Art + Design who in turn assisted the artists throughout the 10-day installation process.

There is also an online extension to the exhibit that mirrors the student collaboration in the United States. Back in Chile, the five artists collectively administer a studio school in the capital of Santiago. The school, which can be found at taller高校.wordpress.com, mentors younger artists in the practices of installation art.

One of the most intriguing pieces in “Traveling Light” is by Gerardo Pulido. Created with enamel spray paint and egg tempera, the work showcases a technique that mimics the appearance of marble and wood. “I emphasize the materiality of the work with its capacity for illusion, the wall with its transformation into other surfaces, the simulation with its incompleteness,” explained Pulido. “It stresses height differences, horizontal and vertical directions, palace walls and graffiti and fine arts versus decorative painting.”

Rodrigo Canala’s “Empty Banners,” intertwining PVC vinyl plastic and metallic glitter, combines celebration and invitation in its classic placement at doorways. “With their smart and zigzagging invisibility, over the head of the spectator, they threaten to disappear between rooms, between one work and the other, in what art is and what art is not, making space without saying anything,” explained Canala.

“Common Place,” located on the top floor of the museum, switches gears from focusing on materials to people, as issues of sociology, class and art merge. The multimedia exhibit, which combines photography, film and surveys of 100 women between the ages of 19 and 95, explores an often private element of the female experience in Latin America. The installation questions perceived societal roles and sheds new light on the dynamic between Latin housekeepers and their housewife employers, stripping the veneer of gender, power, class and race expectations.
Homeless in Haiti

The fall, the Art Museum of the Americas will examine life in Haiti with two exhibits, "Text Life Haiti" and "Young Haitians with Disability.

Photographer Wysté gallery visited Haiti following the devastating January 2010 earthquake to chronicle the lives of displaced Haitians in the semi-permanent tent communities that have sprung in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. According to the United Nations, more than 650,000 people still live in the sprawling tent camps nearly two years after the 7.0-magnitude quake, with many lacking basic services and vulnerable to sexual violence and cholera.

Gallery's resulting photo series shines a light on these uprooted lives, young and old, working independently and creatively to improve their bleak conditions. The images are collected in a book, "Text Life Haiti," and offer a visceral depiction of people facing tremendous challenges with undeterred resilience, relying on their own resources and ingenuity rather than outside aid.

Wysté Gallery, a Fulbright Fellow and former University of Pennsylvania professor, has been published in The New York Times, Esquire, Mother Jones, Newsweek and other publications. In 1994, after graduating from the Yale School of the Arts of New York University, Gallery began traveling the Caribbean photographing spiritual sites through a Rockefeller grant. He spent two years in Trinidad and Tobago on a Fulbright Fellowship, documenting its religious places, landscapes, people and homes.

Wyatt Gallery's "Get in White Text" is part of the photography book "Text Life Haiti," whose proceeds go to post-disaster recovery efforts.

Gallery's work in Haiti offers a vastly different perspective. The huts of Haiti are very primitive, not built but merely enclosed by huts they moved or built themselves. The gallery offers a powerful visual essay on what daily life is like for hundreds of thousands of Haitians. Gallery aims to help them as well.

Copies of "Text Life Haiti" will be available throughout the run of the exhibition for $40, with 100 percent of the proceeds going to the Haitian charity JHF Haitian Relief Organization, Healing Haiti, and the Global Symposium. The book has as of yet raised more than $130,000 for Haitian relief.

— Freisa Rodriguez

According to the museum, the exhibit dovetails with the shared interests of the OAS Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), whose mission is to link women's rights with effective public policy.

"The housewife and maid [connection] is a really interesting relationship that happens in almost every home in Latin America. These are relationships everyone knows about but no one talks about," said Adriana Osipina, the museum's education coordinator. The project explores these women's sensory and emotional experiences, highlighting what the subjects share and how they differ.

"It can very well be a love-hate relationship," muse Osipina. "The housekeeper can know everything about the housewife, but she needs to respect the boundaries. The exhibit examines the domestic and social dynamic behind the relationship and it opens a can of worms."

In addition to the questionnaires, artists Justine Graham and Ruby Ruminit tackle perceptions of hierarchy by having the pairs of women sit together for a portrait. Stereotypes are easily shattered by placing the subjects in white T-shirts with minimal makeup and jewelry, creatively simplifying their appearances to serve as equalizers and make visitors wonder who the housekeeper is and who her employer is.

Freisa Rodriguez is a contributing writer for The Washington Diplomat.