
Art With a Social Conscious Visits SMC

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A row of long gasoline hoses hangs from the ceiling-nine in all. Below their silver metal nozzles are tiny mounds of earth, topped with different objects. One has several bones, another has what looks to be feathers sticking out of it, and another has what looks like beans.

This was one of several art projects presented this past Saturday at the Peter & Susan Barrett Art Gallery (located at the SMC Performing Arts Center) by the inaugural graduates of a new MFA program at Otis College of Art and Design.

Titled "public interventionist education" (or, "p.i.e." for short), the show centered on these graduate's theses, which were all aimed at presenting art in a new and transformative way.

"It's about collective energy," said artist Jules Rochielle Sievert, whose project, "Portable City," involves a mobile table and bench set-up where gallery visitors can sit and sample pie, while chitchatting with one another. "It's about making people feel comfortable in a gallery space," Sievert said, adding that her project builds on the idea of collecting "people's stories."

Suzanne Lacy, who started the Public Practice MFA program at Otis, said she did so because she wanted to allow artists to explore "social themes" and to help "develop communities" with their art.

Andy Manoushagian's project, FREeCOLOGY, is centered on those very ideas. Described in the gallery program guide as "a collective attempt at saving the world from the current economic meltdown and impending ecological crisis," FREeCOLOGY involves a "superstore" where visitors can actually "purchase" different items. These various items include designer shoes, movie posters, and even paperback romance novels. But when Manoushagian says these items are available for "purchase," he doesn't mean by cash or credit card.

"You can purchase them with the promise of doing something for someone else, or by bringing something back," said Manoushagian. The idea is that visitors can get their hands on any one of the available objects, like a poster for the recent Jim Carey film "Yes Man," by promising to do a good deed for somebody or by bringing back another object that can in turn be "purchased" by someone else. According to Manoushagian, it's all about creating "art that acknowledges the world."

The program secured the gallery space with the help of one of the five graduates, Ofunne Obiamiwe, who also happens to be an SMC professor. In describing how she approached the school about showcasing the works, Obiamiwe said she "asked nicely."

Obiamiwe's project, "Oil Change Ogoni 9: Our Land is Your Land," features the nine long gasoline hoses dangling above the mounds of earth, as well as mixed media and converted filling stations. The project, inspired by the book "Next Gulf," is-according to Obiamiwe-about the "egregious history" of exploitation by oil companies in Niger.

According to Obiamiwe, plans are underway to bring a class of SMC art students to the gallery so that they can speak to the artists about the projects on display. However, nothing is set in stone yet.

For those who attended the evening's exhibit, it was a chance to view and interact with socially conscious art, which for many was a pleasant deviation from the norm. As one visitor put it, "it's nice to see artists that use art in different ways, not just [creating] art for art's sake."

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