

Where Visas Are Not Needed

Eight Artists From Around the World Blur the Borders in Search of Global Truth

By JESSICA DAWSON
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No, we can't all just get along. That much is clear. As cultural conflicts and border disputes occupy our headlines, the timing for a politically minded exhibition like Numark Gallery's "Cultural Crossing," which opened last weekend, seems just right. Neither warmongers nor peaceniks, the show's artists observe and comment, wryly, on the effects of global culture clashes—the civil wars, economic imperialism and colonialist impulses that mark the dark side of human nature.

Curated by Cheryl Numark and Paul Brewer, the Corcoran College of Art and Design's director of college exhibitions, this ambitious show assembles eight politically minded international artists. They point out the contradictions in our relentless boundary-making and -breaking. Their observations yield so many comic incongruities that despite the show's sober topic, much of the work triggers a smile—if a sardonic one. Of the 15 works on view, only Mick O'Shea's smart-alecky floor piece, tracing the United Nations crest in aspirin tablets, feels petulant.

South African photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa documents the tentacles of capitalism reaching into unlikely corners. He's discovered unintended effects of economic imperialism in South Africa's poorest townships. There, Mthethwa photographed a woman standing in her squalid kitchen among nicked cupboards and beat-up pots. Her walls, though, burst with color. Ads hawking discounted living- and dining-room sets—goodies that couldn't be further from her life—literally wallpaper the place. It's a ludicrous sight,



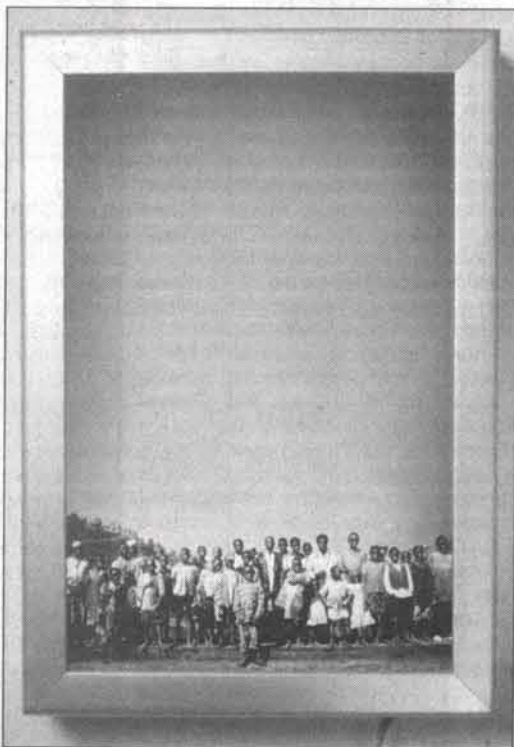
PHOTOS COURTESY NUMARK GALLERY

Out of Africa come Zwelethu Mthethwa's photograph of an ad-paper shack, above, and Alfredo Jaar's shot of adrift Rwandan refugees, below, part of Numark Gallery's provocative collection, "Cultural Crossing."

to be sure, but a darn clever idea. In a stroke of home decoration, one woman's practicality obliterates the schemes of a thousand admen.

There are no clear winners in South African-born Siemon Allen's clever collages. The artist inserts phrases culled from newspapers and academic texts into panels from Tintin cartoons. His collages are a smart sendup of colonialism. Young white Tintin, star of the still-popular Belgian comic books from the 1930s and '40s, traveled the world—Africa, the Soviet Union, North and South America—winding up in un-PC scenarios. In Allen's hands, Tintin's colonialist leanings get magnified to laughable proportions. But so, too, does post-colonial theory.

In four pieces at Numark, Allen stuffs Tintin's word bubbles with decidedly un-cartoonish dialogue. Gesturing to a locomotive wreck behind him, Tintin addresses a group of blacks with "Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe." A well-dressed African woman, annoyed with her assigned role as second-class citizen, retorts, "Apparently, our 'post-historical' adventure doesn't differ much from a Spaghetti Western."



In another panel, a character utters a paragraph of post-colonial text that would make the most arcane theorist proud. Dogma, when uttered by cartoon characters, deflates rather rapidly.

Territorialism, too, devolves into farce in the hands of Japanese artist Yukinori Yanagi. He introduced ants into plastic farms filled with colored sand that he arranged to mimic flags. The ants are long gone, but their tunnels remain. Yanagi's "Two Chinas" paired boxes aping the Chinese and Taiwanese national banners and connected them by tubes to a third receptacle. During the course of the ants' stay, that small box became a miniature demilitarized zone—the sand harvested from the ants' tunneling mixed sand from both flags. These insectile diplomats went about the business of survival regardless of political boundaries. If nature doesn't respect borders, why should we?

Proffering a less utopian response to Yanagi's questions are the photographs of Chan Chao and Alfredo Jaar, here documenting populations pushed around by ethnic conflicts. In the context of "Cultural Crossing," their pieces seem to make a case for borders that organize and unite us. With-

out them, we'd have no heroes. Or villains.

In a cross between portraiture and documentary photography, Chao and Jaar turn out a version of photojournalism you'd never find in a newspaper. They don't capture skirmishes, grenade-throwing or bloodshed. Instead, we see them waiting around at the refugee camp, the lull between fight and flight. Both Chao's portrait of Burmese freedom fighters and Jaar's Rwandan refugees capture nationless nationals during their downtime.

Two stills from Israeli-born artist Michal Rovner's film "Overhang" look like abstract versions of the nomads Chao and Jaar shoot. Alternating footage of New York during a snowstorm and the Negev desert during military operations, Rovner's nearly out-of-focus images devolve into humans moving across indistinct backgrounds. Left to impose our own meaning on these ambiguous shapes, we see those figures as mobile populations eluding danger.

Speaking to contemporary ramifications of past conflict, Shimon Attie projected World War II-era photographs of Jews onto dilapidated facades in Berlin's Jewish quarter and then photographed the eerie spectacle. Two of those photos, from his "Writing on the Wall" series, are on view. Even as Attie resuscitates the past with his projections, the photos show a construction site sprouting next door. That dirt pile heralds the gentrification that would soon destroy the quarter's old buildings—and with it, Attie argues, a bit of Jewish history. His project is something of a massive-scale scrapbook.

Attie's resurrection of the past seems an idealist's struggle. Sentimentality and progress will always live side by side. It's the kind of a paradox that fuels great art—and bitter conflict.

Cultural Crossing at Numark Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-6 p.m., 202-628-3810, to May 4.



Shimon Attie projects the past onto Berlin's present as the future looms just offstage in his "Writing on the Wall" series.