

Art in Review

'Stargazers'

'Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation With 21 Contemporary Artists'

Bronx Museum of the Arts
1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania
Through May 29

Friday is Elizabeth Catlett's 96th birthday, and there's a party in progress for her at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, with younger colleagues from two generations in attendance. They're a stellar array, they owe Ms. Catlett a debt, and in her life and work they have everything to admire.

Her story is often-told. Born in Washington in 1915, a grandchild of slaves, she studied science at Howard University, then plunged into art with sculpture and prints blending Socialist Realism, modernist abstraction and African influences. In 1946 she went to Mexico and immersed herself in the politically charged atmosphere of Taller de Gráfica Popular. After marrying the artist Francisco Mora (1922-2002), she made that country her home, with periodic returns to the United States.

Little, if any, of the work by the 21 artists chosen by the independent curator Isolde Brielmaier was made for the occasion, but all of it indirectly touches on Ms. Catlett's life and work. Roberto Visani's 2009 sculpture of a cast plastic handgun in a smashed glass case and Wardell Milan's 2008 photographic montage of a world in ruins pick up on references to military violence in her prints from the 1960s.

Her repeated images of maternal groupings find counterparts in family portrait photographs by Xavier Simons and Renee Cox. And the figure of the solitary woman that dominates the 31 examples of Ms. Catlett's art placed throughout the show finds echoes in the works by many younger artists, like Lalla Essaydi, Iona Rozeal Brown and Kalup Linzy, with Sam Durant's photograph "Female Indian (Nude)" and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz's mural-scale "WEPA Woman: Exile Series/Lamento de la Llorona" standing out.

Ms. Brielmaier has also added some vintage Taller de Gráfica prints to the mix. But the show is Ms. Catlett's. Maybe it's the group context, with its voluble personalities, but I've never seen her formal assurance and expressive serenity look so commanding. She's the life of the party just by being the quietest, wisest voice in the room.

(The exhibition "Digame: Elizabeth Catlett's Forever Love" is on view through May 26 in the Neil L. and Angelica Zander Rudenstein Gallery, W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African-American Research at Harvard University.)

HOLLAND COTTER

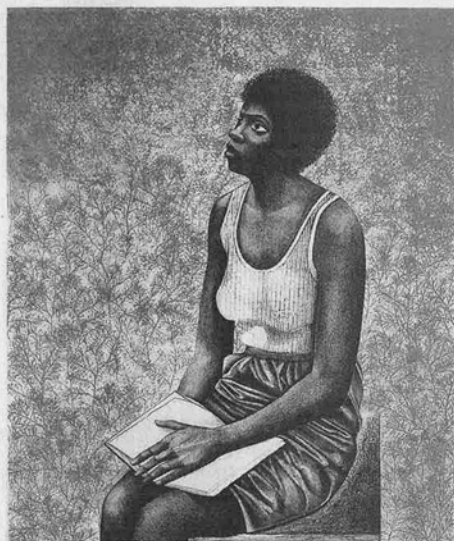
Günther Uecker

'The Early Years'

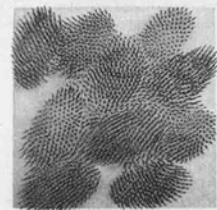
L & M Arts
45 East 78th Street, Manhattan
Through Saturday

Few artists have put the common nail to such varied expressive use as Günther Uecker, a founding member, with Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, of the liberal-minded postwar European Zero Group. That much is clear from this extraordinary, museum-quality survey of works, mostly from the late 1950s and '60s.

At the time, artists on both sides of the Atlantic — including Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Lee Bontecou and Yayoi Kusama — were striving to avoid tradi-



Elizabeth Catlett's "Red Leaves" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which is showing works by her and younger artists.



Günther Uecker's "Flower," from 1968, is made of nails.



"Chameleon" is one of Sascha Braunig's more recent works.

tional materials and techniques. Mr. Uecker, who was born in Wendorf in Mecklenburg, Germany, in 1930, came of artistic age in Berlin and lived in New York in the mid-1960s, took additional inspiration from Kandinsky's cosmic abstractions and Vladimir Mayakovsky's injunction that, "Poetry is made with a hammer."

Poetry is among the things that Mr. Uecker made, especially in a series of white painted reliefs in which fields of hammered nails create oddly soft-looking, undulant textures and clouds. Nails also served to scratch textured motifs — targets and stripes — into surfaces of wet paint and to turn found objects into bristling, fetishlike sculptures or veritable star bursts. An old chair with a seat and leg covered with nails seems alive, as if growing its own pelt. Another favored material is twine, which turns a chair into a cross between Rappinzel and Cousin Itt, and is also crucial to figures in "Sand Mill," a small mechanical indoor earthwork

from 1970.

This exhibition underscores the amount of interesting art being made just as American art, at least, was simplistically divided into Pop and Minimalism.

ROBERTA SMITH

'Soulful Stitching'

'Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India'

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
515 Lenox Avenue, at 135th Street, Hamilton Heights
Through June 30

A few years ago, while researching African influences in India, the art historian Henry John Drewal was struck by the vivid beauty of a type of quilted bed covering that he found in a village home he stayed at in Karnataka. Walking through the village, he saw similar quilts draped over fences and airing on rooftops. All shared a distinctively African-derived patchwork style.

Called kawandi, the quilts are made by women of the Siddi ethnic group, descendants of early African migrants to South Asia, including slaves brought by Portuguese colonists in the 16th century. Strips and patches of recycled cloth, solid-colored, patterned or shot through with glittery threads, are the basic components. Each woman develops her own variation on the general style by arranging the geometric pieces in a certain way, inserting religious symbols (usually Christian or Muslim), and using fabrics with familial associations. Each quilt became an archive of cultural and personal history.

Mr. Drewal, a professor of African and African Diaspora arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has transferred his own infatuation with kawandi into entrepreneurship by organizing the nonprofit Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative. Through the cooperative, quilts — small enough for cradles, big enough to cover several sleepers — can be sold internationally, with proceeds going back to the Siddi makers.

You can view the images of the available stock at henrydrewal.com, but the real joy is in seeing the examples on display at the Schomburg, where together they look like a spring garden in bloom. Each quilt is accompanied

by a portrait photograph of its maker, and two short videos documenting Siddi music and dance contribute to a mood of exhilarated discovery.

HOLLAND COTTER

Rochelle Feinstein

'The Estate of Rochelle F.'

On Stellar Rays
133 Orchard Street, Lower East Side
Through May 1

Rochelle Feinstein, who has been painting at the intersection of feminist insouciance and Rauschenbergian exuberance for the last two decades, here toys with the idea of ending the struggle. But the invigorating effect of her exhibition argues for the opposite of retirement.

In a handwritten cri de coeur introducing a series of collage-drawings representing plans for the paintings in this show, Ms. Feinstein meditates on the dismal economy's effects on herself and other Americans. She decides to consolidate her remaining resources into one last testament.

Made of paint, canvas, newspapers, plastic foam, photographs, torn fabric and a sad, heart-shape balloon spray-painted in rainbow stripes, Ms. Feinstein's works play a mordantly knowing, passive-aggressive, art-about-art game. A five-foot-square canvas announces the exhibition title, "The Estate of Rochelle F.," in buoyant, frayed, glue-on letters cut from black fabric. "Mr. Natural" is a sly satire on creative vilification. It has a bold, brushy X com position that, coagulated green paint punctuated by a splash of white, crystalline material that can be read as alchemical salt or the ejaculate of the heroic male Expressionist. The lovely "Image of an Image" offers a feminine alternative: sheer curtains covered with a patchwork of gold and aluminum leaf hang from a steel rod over a similarly decorated canvas. Painting subsides into bourgeois, domestic complacency.

What true creative striver does not at some point feel the pain of futility in this capriciously rewarding world? Ms. Feinstein's wry, melancholic art suggests that despair may be a fecund mother of invention.

KEN JOHNSON

Sascha Braunig

Foxy Production
623 West 27th Street, Chelsea
Through April 30

Sascha Braunig cooks up a strange brew of portraiture, Surrealism and luminescent abstraction in her auspicious, first solo exhibition. Painting on medium-small-sized canvases with a sensuous, greasy touch, Ms. Braunig renders humanoid heads that have been weirdly transformed. She works not from life or photographs of live people, but from sculptures made of various materials. To mannequinlike heads she adds fabric, sequins and paint, and she casts them in colored light to dreamy, hallucinogenic effect.

"Chameleon" pictures a bald