

ART REVIEW; A New Latino Essence, Remixed and Redistilled

By HOLLAND COTTER

Few such concisely provocative images turn up in "El real viaje Real/The Real Royal Trip" at P.S. 1, a smaller show (19 individual artists and a collective) spread over a lot more space, but generating far less energy.

The title refers to Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas on expeditions bankrolled by the Spanish monarchy. And the exhibition -- organized by the veteran Swiss-based curator Harald Szeemann, with Christian Dominguez and Jimena Blázquez, curators at P.S. 1 -- purports to reveal a historically reflexive link between Spain and the Spanish-speaking Americas in art produced today. In fact, the show, with its puffy catalog, doesn't begin to fulfill this task, settling instead for being a mixed-bag showcase of 15 artists born in Spain, with one each from Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico and Portuguese-speaking Brazil tossed in.

The Brazilian Ernesto Neto, the best known of the group internationally, contributes an impressive example of his fragrant biomorphic sculptures made from pouches of stretchable fabric filled with herbs, spices and cloves. Arresting and less familiar is a performance-based video by Sergio Prego, who has a concurrent solo show at Lombard-Freid in Chelsea.

But only three artists fully engage with the theme of cultural transaction implied by the title. Santiago Sierra, born in Madrid and living in Mexico, is one, with photographs of his own projects revolving around themes of immigration and dispossession. Another is Pilar Albarracín, who forges a trans-Mediterranean connection in an installation titled "The Trip: Habibi." Set outdoors in P.S. 1's courtyard it consists of a beat-up and frantically bucking Mercedes piled high with the luggage of North African migrants.

The strongest piece by far, though, is an installation by Tania Bruguera, an artist born in Cuba and now living in Chicago. Titled "Autobiografía," it lures the visitor down a long, narrow corridor filled with the sound of voices repeating political slogans from the Cuban revolution, and into a small pitch-black space pulsating with inchoate noise. Not recommended for anyone prone to claustrophobia, it constitutes an intense physical and psychological trip on its own.

It's too bad that "The Real Royal Trip" didn't follow Ms. Bruguera's propulsive lead and concentrate on dramatizing and disrupting the very notion of identity politics, which has, after all, always been fraught with problems. By the time it finally caught on in mainstream New York art in the 1990's, artists who stood to gain attention from it, Latinos among them, were already seeing it as just the latest way to corral them into a manipulable, if temporarily marketable, outsider corner.