

Art in Review; Spectral Evidence

By HOLLAND COTTER
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Rotunda Gallery
33 Clinton Street, Brooklyn Heights
Through March 3

While I was at Rotunda, a man came in from the street to complain, heatedly, about a banner over the gallery door that read, "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday." The banner was a copy, by the artist Terry Adkins, of one that W. E. B. Du Bois placed outside the office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the 1930s, and it is part of a larger piece by Mr. Adkins that includes copies of government files on Du Bois, who was marked as an agitator.

As I listened to the gallery's director, Isolde Brielmaier, negotiate a lengthy political discussion with the visitor, I realized that I hadn't heard that kind of talk about principles in the art world since I don't know when. And although nothing else in the show, organized by the sharp young video artist Steven Lam, is as overtly confrontational as Mr. Adkins's piece, there's plenty here to fuel thinking about the hard shell of illusion that surrounds official history, and about art's attempt to crack that shell open.

A film by Jill Godmilow meditatively recreates, frame by frame, Harun Farocki's 1969 documentary "Inextinguishable Fire," on the origins of napalm. Another film, "Invisible Like Peace," by Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam, who use the moniker Lin + Lam, re-edits American-made Vietnamese propaganda films to take the pulse of a political era still obscured, for Americans, by layers of guilt and blame.

Sreshta Rit Premnath examines proposed plans to reconstitute the Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed, partly through misread history, in Afghanistan in 2001. Mary Bilyou reworks early-20th-century films of a clinic for epilepsy, extracting the figures of patients to focus on the institutional setting itself. Elaine Reich's "Gray Man" (1988), for which the artist created a knitted version of a figure in a 19th-century ethnological photograph, suggests that the original "authentic" image was woven of ideology and desire.

Olen Hsu considers Western notions of what "Asian" means in an original musical composition based on Debussy's "orientalist" harmonies. And in an interesting piece conceived for live performance in 1991 and recently reworked for video, Simon Leung ruminates on the myths and realities surrounding sexuality in the time of AIDS.

Conor McGrady, Walead Beshty and the team of Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani all make apt contributions, as does Mr. Adkins, whose evidential art gets the show off the ground and keeps it on track. HOLLAND COTTER

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