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Pure and Simple: Art Causes a Sensation; At the BMA, the Powerfully Playful 'Bodyspace' by Blake Gopnik (February 25, 2001)

Late last week, as I was waiting for a cab at the Baltimore Museum of Art, a thoughtful guard asked me a question I get all the time: How, he wondered, could the general public ever come to appreciate difficult contemporary art?

I gave him some of my usual answers: that all art is murderously hard to come to grips with at a more than superficial level; that older art only seems more easily absorbed because it's more familiar and comes packaged with centuries of critical bromides; that to enjoy art, old or new, you need only have an open mind and eyes and a taste for long looking and thinking and learning -- just as you do for any complex activity, from baseball to baking, that you hope to get a whole lot out of.

And then I realized that it was a particularly poignant question for him to be asking that day, in that place.

A few yards up the museum's central stairway, curator Helen Molesworth was just finishing the installation of "Bodyspace," a lively exhibition of contemporary art. I'd like to imagine that a sensual show like "Bodyspace" might make clear that the so-called difficulty of contemporary art is in the mind of the skeptical beholder, rather than in the art itself.

What is there not to get about a giant, room-filling adult playpen made of stretchy Lycra mesh? You'd have to keep your inner child thoroughly repressed not to want to kick off your shoes and climb inside Ernesto Neto's "Sister Naves," the centerpiece of this nine-artist show. (The full roster includes veteran American installation artists Robert Gober and Cady Noland, less established U.S. artists David Schafer and Claudia Matzko -- the latter from Baltimore, and the only local in the show -- American glass artist Josiah McElheny, Korean American Sowon Kwon, Korean Do-Ho Suh, Neto, who's from Brazil, and the late Cuban American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres.)

Two room-size cubes, sewn out of a sheer fabric that looks to be recycled from a giantess's pantyhose, are stretched a few feet off the ground in the middle of a massive gallery; a hanging tunnel of the same stuff is sewn around back to join the two cubes. Entering through an open seam, you get to gently bounce your way around the first enclosure, your normal weight just slightly lightened by the trampoline effect of the taught-pulled Lycra, while you feel up a beanbag polyp rising from its middle and sniff a bulb of powdered cloves that stretches down from overhead. Exiting through the rear, you squeeze through the man-size birth canal that connects to the next playpen, this time featuring a beanbag floor you can sink right into.

As you lie back, almost submerged in a Lycra-covered sea of styrofoam pellets, you get the chance to note the strange perceptual effects of Neto's piece.

At first, as you look out and through a single, double, triple layer of the work's veiled walls, you're struck by the peculiar fogging of your vision. But as you look down at the unchanged lines of your body, your brain is forced to recognize that it's Neto's world, and not your eyes, that is the source of the soft focus. Then there's the strange surprise that all this visual mist is not matched by any change in what you hear, until your nose kicks in, and notices a fog of cloves that is soft and shrill at the same time, like a police whistle heard at a great distance.

Once your senses start to work, your mind does, too, tracking the associations linked to what you feel: the magic way the stitching on a pair of pantyhose gives shape to formless stretch, perhaps; the strange place that flesh-toned nylons occupy between prosthesis, taboo undergarment and the aesthetics of fine fashion. As for those cloves, they may conjure up hippie cigarettes, or Christmas punch, a mother's ethnic cooking, or maybe just a pungent foody smell you wouldn't want too much of. (The last is my own take, and leaves me wondering whether such a generic sensory effect might not be superfluous to Neto's installation.)

Rather than reading as esoteric intellectualalia, as contemporary art often is made out to be, Neto's piece may, if anything, come too close to good, clean fun: a cornucopia of bodily sensations without enough to keep the higher faculties engaged.

"Sister Naves" points to stuff outside itself, but only just. (Because the human mind is built to hunt for pattern and significance in any stimulus that it comes up against -- "Can I eat this, or will it eat me?" and on and up from there -- it's hard to imagine a work of art that wouldn't trigger a full slate of associations, given time.) But other pieces in "Bodyspace" strike a richer, more evident balance between sense and sensation.

The two almost identical sculptures from Schafer's "Stepped Density" series hover in a perfect middle ground between high formalist aesthetics and low commercial culture, as though a minimalist artist like Donald Judd or Tony Smith were to moonlight doing mall decors, not waiting tables but making them.

Riffing on the ergonomics of fast-food furniture design, Schafer presents a four-foot square of steel flat on the ground, painted in flawless sea-blue lacquer, from which sprout eight "stools" topped with perfectly round discs unmodified to cradle living rears. There's every marker of pure sculpture in the geometric rigor and high finish of these pieces -- the artist has left instructions that the museum's no-touch rule should be strictly enforced -- along with every invitation to take them for granted as the unnoticed machinery of commerce.

Schafer's sculptures present a kind of apotheosis of modernist purity, such as you'd find in the most high-minded abstract art, made to serve the needs of Burger King. Or maybe it's the other way around: This is a mall designer's Platonic dream of order in the food court.

The hint of Pop-artish tongue-in-cheek you get in Schafer's work is echoed in other pieces in this show. Gober's pewter drain, punched into the museum wall at just about chest height, presents the banal in just the place where pictures normally should go. Suh makes life-size soft facsimiles of a traditional Korean home, and of its more modern bathroom, every beam and wall and toilet seat stitched up in billowing green silk. McElheny contributes a kind of pseudo-high-end store display: All the classics of modern glass design are reborn by the artist in plain white versions, then set out on tidy shelving units, as though the artist refuses to distinguish between esoteric abstract sculpture and generic stuff-for-sale.

The most intriguing piece in "Bodyspace," however, leaves all such irony behind. Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled (Water)," from 1995, is a simple hanging curtain of bright plastic beads, in repeating stripes of blue and clear and silver, that divides a largish gallery in two. There's lots of pure, abstractified sensation here: the almost-severing of space effected by the curtain; the unusual permeability of a work of sculpture to the passing human body; the play of light and color, even sound, across these strings of beads.

And there's real-world reference, too: to the modest medium the artist uses to make fine art; to the childlike pleasure to be found in bright gewgaws; to water, air and landscape, and to the way they can be mimicked in a tawdry decoration.

But none of this is meant, I think, as cleverly ironic contradiction between high form and low meaning. Rather, it's a real celebration of how formal excellence can be found in, and forged of, the everyday: that the highfalutin can be built from simple stuff, but more importantly, that the simple stuff around us has already within it the potential to be highfalutin, if it gets the kind of single-minded attention that only a museum-goer ever gives it.

Which brings me to the one, nearly fatal failing of this exhibition.

I'm certain the art in this show has something to say to anyone who comes to it with some goodwill. It may even have the larger effect of convincing skeptics of the potential eloquence of contemporary art in general.

But someone, somewhere at the BMA seems to disagree.

The uncluttered setting that these works deserve to speak their piece is interrupted, just about destroyed, by big, nagging wall texts that forever jump into your line of sight and yank at your attention. They purport to tell us what the art is saying, and, in the process, quite outshout it. It's not so much that the texts are bad -- I often buy a chunk at least of what they have to say -- as that they demonstrate a vast distrust of the art's own eloquence, and of the audience's willingness to give a listen to the many different things it has to say to them. The art becomes a riddle to which the wall texts supply the answer, rather than the source of a special kind of experience that only comes into being in the act of working through the things a piece may do and mean to you.

Unlike the potent art it's meant to serve, the BMA's intrusive signs reinforce the insecurities of people like that friendly, open-minded guard, rather than striking boldly out against them.