

Artists Exhibit Personal Definitions of Harlem

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Published Thursday 30 October 2008 02:13am EST.

Individuals looking to escape the recent rain while waiting for a bus outside of the Russ Berrie Medical Science Pavilion in northern Harlem were met by a nice surprise just inside the building's double doors—25 different works of art that make up “EVOLUTION: The Changing Face of Harlem.”

The art exhibit, housed in two adjacent spaces on 168th Street in Columbia University Medical Center buildings, addresses the question “What does Harlem mean to me?” from the perspective of artists who call Harlem home.

The exhibit comes on the heels of fledgling pre-construction around Columbia's Manhattanville campus and in many ways seems to link Harlem's artistic legacy, which stretches back nearly a century to the Harlem Renaissance, with its future. It is presented by Columbia's Office of Government and Community Affairs to address community perceptions of the neighborhood and concerns, particularly during the current economic uncertainty. The office, according to its Web site, “works to ensure that Columbia's interactions with government and with its surrounding communities are sound, well informed, and mutually beneficial.”

Varying from photographs to quilts, paintings to contemporary African art, the exhibit encompasses an eclectic collection of responses that took on the meaning of Harlem collectively and individually.

A note from Curator and exhibit artist Misha McGlown explained, “Each artist's unique perspective on Harlem will symbolize a piece of the puzzle—a small but significant element in the composite of a rich, historic enclave that finds itself ever-evolving.”

In their defining Harlem and its meaning, the 25 “EVOLUTION” artists—all members of arTHARLEM, a Harlem-based non-profit organization—varied between expressions of comfort to commentaries on gentrification and the area's changing face.

Some pieces in the exhibit appeared to literally expose that evolution. Erik Sommer's mixed-media piece Muted appeared like layers of urban grit, caked thickly on the canvas and scraped away in some places to expose the red heart of the community. In an explanation of his piece, Sommers wrote, "Harlem to me means culture, diversity, opportunity and moments of comfort followed by moments of uncertainty."

Despite being located so far uptown, many of the pieces focused particularly on issues of gentrification and Columbia's Manhattanville expansion project.

Explaining the thought behind her mixed-media collage highlighting the 125th Street iron arches on the 1 line subway Going Under Broadway, Christina Stahr wrote "Going Under is not a nostalgic clinging to a romanticized post-industrial landscape, but a fragmented panoramic view of all that will be obliterated by the changes engulfing this neighborhood, my neighborhood."

In her description of her photograph All Things Are What They Seem To Be, depicting a white woman threatening a passive black man wearing an "I (heart) Harlem" t-shirt, artist Allicette Torres writes, "The changing face of Harlem has caused a gunless war to brew, with the ammunition being dollars and cents ... With new lines of worth redrawn, we find Blacks and Latinos of Harlem having their land being traded for proverbial beads and blankets."

Located in the Pavilion's gallery, which served mostly as a hallway, the exhibit seems to receive little foot traffic other than from those who worked in the building and walked hurriedly past the pieces, leaving the question of whom this exhibit really serves unanswered.

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