ARTFORUM

First Take
10 New Artists

Winter Preview
50 Shows Worldwide

Carol Bove
Installed at the Bohen Foundation, Davis’s photographs form an exhibition—cum-diary, with images accompanied by fragments of text reproduced in a “newspaper” about the show. Rather than explain the images, Davis offered imagistic, psychological background material. The photograph Grandmother’s Buttons, 2002, for example, triggers a memory of his left activist grandma: “When I was twelve, we chained ourselves to part of Cape Canaveral. She told me she felt guilty that she’d never been arrested, but proud she’d marched on Washington... This is pale nostalgia. Can the photograph cure it?” An oil stain (a perfect signifier for contemporary geopolitics) is identified merely as Nixon Monument, Nixon Birthplace, 2002, but explained thus: “After driving all the way to San Clemente and being told politely—as only old Republican ladies can be polite—that no tripods were allowed in the library, this stain was my only recourse.”

Modeled after Walker Evans’s Depression-era American Photographs (1938) (which also influenced Frank’s The Americans [1958]), Davis’s images provide a shorthand for both the political moment and a study of the potentially engaged artist in a confused and confusing era. Where much recent work (from Olav Westphalen to Daniel Joseph Martinez) has focused on fringe elements like the Unabomber, Davis’s “politics” are mundane to the point of absurdity: A taco stand is painted with text declaring ONE PEOPLE, ONE NATION, ONE TACO, ONE DESTINY.

“My Life in Politics” is both an oblique self-portrait and a portrait of the United States. But can the two be separated? As Arthur Danto recently stated in these pages, one can renounce citizenship but not being an American. Nevertheless, we are far from the days of Gilbert Stuart, a tattered copy of whose iconic presidential portrait figures in Davis’s Thrift Shop Washington, 2004, which greeted visitors at the exhibition’s entrance. Rather than offer a utopian fix, Davis instead throws his signs and signifiers into the air. Politics, particularly in the face of defeat, is about gestures: the filibuster, the oil stain, the photo of a Rush Limbaugh book display that garners Davis’s tersest comment, “Enough said.”

Davis documents the way contemporary politics works on a velvet-rope model, emphasizing the divide between insider and outsider. Photographs such as his Closed Circuit, 2003, which depicts a television in the office of a Massachusetts state legislator tuned to a closed-circuit broadcast of the senate floor, illustrate the way in which the political scene is now twice removed by technology. We can see further than ever into the halls of power, while still being kept at a safe distance from them.

But there are always images, which commemorate or memorialize the effort at effective dissent. At a moment when it might be more dangerous to do something—as the case of Steven Kurtz suggests—Davis’s images are relatively safe, documenting the battle rather than fighting on its front lines. However, at the very end of the exhibition’s “newspaper,” in reference to his photograph Election Map, 2004, even Davis seems to give up hope. “I propose secession,” he says. “Honestly, even one big union won’t help us now... This country is a tragedy, literally, Fatal flaw and all.” One only hopes his words, like his images, are documentary but not prophetic.

—Martha Schwendener
whole scene is covered with forms in furious motion, and there are explosions and fireworks above a field of waves.

Initially this enchanting exhibition seemed slightly baffling: I didn’t see what unified its four parts. But on further reflection, I realized that this confusion was central to Sikander’s project. The world coming into view, as if we were just coming to consciousness, is her essential concern. Reading 52 Ways of Looking as the sketch for Pursuit Curve, I began to see how she thinks. The content and geometry of her work may come from Mughal art, but her way of seeing is all her own. Some artists merely offer exotic subject matter. Sikander’s more elusive achievement is to make persistent gentleness a convincing and consistent strength.

—David Carrier

PHILADELPHIA

PEPÓN OSORIO

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

After completing a three-year volunteer residency at Philadelphia’s Department of Human Services, Pepón Osorio elaborately reconstructed its offices in the galleries of the ICA. Face to Face (all works 2004), one of three installations shown here, was assembled from re-created materials from the DHS—desks full of case histories, computer terminals, and sundry office supplies. Claustrophobic and windowless, it made one feel as though lost inside a real government bureaucracy, which metes out death by drab repetition and administrative protocol. Signs of the struggle with dehumanization were everywhere: Caged in a large steel-wire bin piled up with the possessions of a client family, a video narrated the mother’s harrowing story of her suicidal son, juxtaposed with footage of him as a once-happy toddler. Reproduced family photos and inspirational posters taped to the walls above desks personalized otherwise oppressively generic cubicles.

In the next gallery, Trials and Turbulence simulated a family courtroom, complete with a judge’s bench, audience chairs, and an institutional-gray carpet. In the center, an ornate wood-and-glass vitrine borrowed from a forgotten department store held a meticulous diorama of a messy tenement bathroom. On the shower curtain was projected a video of a young woman named Adrienne who volunteered an intimate account of her ordeals growing up.