

Enthusiasm for Rubbish That Avoids Clichés

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Although there is a growing awareness of how wasteful our society is, it seems that everything is still disposable, from cellphones and furniture to clothing and toys. In other countries, poorer countries, many of those items would be recycled and saved.

I was reminded of this while viewing Quisqueya Henríquez's exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Of the approximately 25 works on view, about half are made of recycled objects and materials, some found and scavenged on the streets of the artist's hometown of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.

At 41, Ms. Henríquez is one of the better-known Caribbean contemporary artists. Her work is in private collections in Miami and elsewhere, and she has been included in many international group exhibitions and biennials. But this is her first major solo presentation in a New York area museum. Appropriately, it is in the Bronx, home to a large concentration of Dominican emigrants.

The show's playful and inventive tone is set at the museum entrance, where an industrial freezer contains buckets of bright-blue ice cream flavored with Caribbean seawater. (Six gallons of seawater from the Dominican Republic were shipped to the United States before the exhibition.) The ice cream is free and worth tasting, though a little salty for my taste.

Ms. Henríquez's seawater ice cream is a good example of her use of nontraditional artistic materials. It is an approach to art-making that has informed her entire career, including some years spent living in Cuba, Mexico and more recently the United States. While living in Mexico, for example, she worked with seaweed washed up on the beaches to make sculptures that she photographed. Several of these photographs are hanging in the exhibition.

Other, more conventional works employ materials from daily life that she has recycled. There are collages made of drawings combined with fragments of found news photographs of baseball players, and a series of perfectly delightful sculptures created from sports balls of all kinds. They include a basketball carved into the shape of a woman's purse and a soccer ball that she has turned inside out and then cut down to create a close-fitting cap.

I like the sculptures made of balls, in part because they are so inventive and in part because they are such beautiful, inviting objects. Many artists with an enthusiasm for refuse create artworks that look like, well, rubbish. Ms. Henríquez's sculptures are by contrast funny, tough, enlightening and curious — in short, everything artwork in a museum should be.

A related example of this approach is the pile of patterned sheets of wrapping paper using images of trash that the artist photographed on the beaches of Santo Domingo. The paper is colorful and alluring until you realize what exactly it is you are looking at. During the run of the exhibition, all items bought at the museum gift shop will be wrapped free of charge in the paper.

The neighborhood around Ms. Henríquez's apartment has also become a material of sorts. Several works document "found" sounds and images, among them a sound installation built inside a sofa. Visitors are invited to sit on the sofa, relax, close their eyes and then tune in to the street sounds and snippets of conversations recorded by the artist during walks through the streets of Santo Domingo.

Though the dialogue is in Spanish, the audio immerses you in another world. In this sense it is a metaphor for the show, which is all about a vision of the Caribbean beyond what the tourist brochures promise. She shows us a world that is poor, underdeveloped and lacking basic infrastructure. She wants us to appreciate the difficulties of living and making art in a place where an artist's desires are often irreconcilable with the society's material constraints.

But at the same time she strives to find beauty, or a kind of beauty that is touching and real even if it is not pretty. "Dance Hall" (2004) is a three-minute silent color video of an anonymous person dancing the meringue. Taken through a hole in a broken wall, all we see are the dancers' swiveling feet. It is a humble and loving tribute to the country's national music and dance style, created in the 1920s.

Dance music, baseball, the beach — these are popular symbols of Caribbean life and easy, comic targets for any artist. Ms. Henríquez freely adapts them for her purposes, but in ways that to her credit avoid cliché. Honest, tender and improvisational, they make for a show that is unabashedly charming.

“Quisqueya Henríquez: The World Outside,” Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse (at 165th Street), through Jan. 27. Information: (718) 681-6000 or bronxmuseum.org.