

**November 3, 2006**

ART REVIEW

## **A Showcase of Talent, Homegrown and Established**

By **BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO**

There is plenty to see at “Newark Between Us,” a rollicking exhibition of 133 works by 97 artists on the vacant sixth floor of an elegant old bank building. It is hard to take it all in at once, arrayed as it is over some 30,000 square feet, but this is hands down the most exciting contemporary art show to hit Newark in a long time. It also forecasts the transformation of the city into a relatively affordable artists’ haven.

Organized by Rupert Ravens, an artist and curator, “Newark Between Us” is an outgrowth of the city’s annual artists’ open studio tour, sponsored by the Newark Arts Council. Last year, to coincide with the tour, Mr. Ravens organized a show of works by artists mostly from Newark and New York in another vacant office building. That was so successful he decided to repeat it for the 2006 tour last month, this time on a bigger scale and with artists not just from the metropolitan region but from around the world.

With a messiness guaranteed to disconcert more traditional gallerygoers, the artworks are scattered throughout a labyrinth of rough, spare spaces; supporting concrete pylons are chipped and broken, ceiling beams are exposed and a jerry-rigged network of construction wiring provides the lighting (is this to code?). It’s all raw and dicey, but somehow suits the work, which tends less toward conventional media and more toward zany installation art.

There is a lot of freaky stuff here, most of which is hard to fathom without background material on the artists. Some of the most immediately memorable works include a wall of plaster casts of women’s breasts; a mock tomb filled with gilded and metal objects for the afterlife; X-rays of a human skeleton; a United States flag made of rusted barbed wire and smashed glass; a miniature airship hovering in the air; and a three-dimensional sculpture of a dog mauling a man. There is even a nativity scene with a manger, but with the addition of Santa as a hobo and a decapitated reindeer pulling his sleigh.

This is no mere jumble; Mr. Ravens has spent much time and effort coordinating the displays, loosely pairing the artworks by informal themes. Among the groupings is a particularly poignant display of pieces about violence, including Stephen McKenzie’s print dealing with gang warfare in Newark; Jason Clay Lewis’s real rifle bullets engraved with tiny images of celebrities; and one of the best of the last paintings by the late New York political painter Leon Golub. Titled “Bite Your Tongue” (2001), Mr. Golub’s painting takes as its subject military atrocities.

This coupling of powerful works by local artists with that of famous peers who have inspired them, either directly or indirectly, is one of this show’s great strengths. It helps to give the local artists a context, to show that they are making work that fits into an accepted art historical tradition, no matter how obscure, difficult or baffling it may otherwise seem. It also helps to point up the quality of artists living and working in [New Jersey](#).

Beyond the usual names, like Willie Cole of Mine Hill, who is also showing here, there are terrific works by many other New Jersey artists, some well known, others newcomers deserving of attention.

Among the pieces worth seeking out are a wall drawing by Victor Davson; a video by Manuel Acevedo; paintings by Ben Goldman and Sherman Drexler; installations by Stefanie Nagorka, Charlee Swanson, Anne Dushanko Dobek and Matthew Gosser; and objects by James A. Brown.

The list of famous artists is not too shabby either. In addition to the painting by Mr. Golub, there are pieces here by [Yoko Ono](#), Ed Ruscha, [Jasper Johns](#), Martin Puryear, Louise Bourgeois and Nancy Spero, among others.

They are minor works, but the mere presence of these artists lends the exhibition an air of seriousness and credibility often lacking in regional samplers of this kind. It is another example of how skillfully this event has been organized.

*“Newark Between Us,” National Newark Building, 744 Broad Street, Sixth Floor, Newark, through Dec. 17; (973) 744-7452. Open Wednesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., or by appointment.*

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