

ART IN REVIEW

'Body and the Archive'

Artists Space
38 Greene Street, SoHo
Through Feb. 22

"Body and the Archive" takes its title from a 1986 essay by Allan Sekula about the way photography has been used as an agent of social categorization and control. Mr. Sekula's essay ends with the example of apartheid-era South Africa, where blacks were required to carry passbooks with photo identification. This four-person show, organized by Lauri Firstenberg, begins there, with the work of four contemporary South African photographers who deal with a haunting past.

Kay Hassan addresses it directly in collages made from negatives of the passbook photographs. So does Senzeni Marasela, whose images of Stompe Seipie, the schoolboy whose killing ignited anti-apartheid resistance, are printed on tea cloths. Zwelithu Mthethwa, best known for his portraits of black residents in their homes, here shows empty interiors, settings without sitters. Hentie van der Merwe, an artist who deserves further attention, retraces South Africa's military history through photographs of uniforms in a Johannesburg museum: a suit from the Anglo-Boer War looks like a headless skeleton; a World War II wet suit looms like a monster of a collective unconscious.

There are several other things to see here along with Ms. Firstenberg's fine, understated show. A video installation by the Egyptian-born artist Wael Shawky is outstanding: images of Muslim devotees caught up in ritual dance are accompanied by the sounds of the Cypress Hill's hip-hop song "Super Star." While traditional religion and Western pop culture exist side by side in Egypt, their combination here has provocative things to say about art, power and persuasion. This hypnotic piece is part of a larger work by Mr. Shawky scheduled to appear in the Venice Biennale this summer. It's terrific.

A group of photographs of Indian men taken in India itself and in New York by Bharat Sikka, a young artist who seems ready for a gallery solo, is also good. Finally, Oscar Tuazon's "City Without a Ghetto," an installation of a geodesic dome made from cardboard cartons found on the streets of New York, is a fit subject for an extended essay on doable utopian architecture. Like the work around it, it is evidence that a veteran SoHo institution is offering some of the most stimulating new international art in town.

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