

Harlem art exhibition commemorates police shooting victim Amadou Diallo

By Clare Hurley
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Casa Frela Gallery in Harlem has organized an exhibition to mark the seventh anniversary of the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the West African immigrant whose slaying in 1999 by four policemen in a hail of gunfire sparked explosive protests over police brutality and racial profiling in New York City's poor, working class neighborhoods.

Presenting the works of 11 artists, the show is intended to commemorate Diallo himself, as well as to protest the circumstances of his death. While the show's worthy ambitions are offset by its modest, somewhat mediocre results, it remains worth examining. The art work, if imperfect, indicates seriousness on the part of the artists in addressing themselves to important issues—but one might ask how their aims could have been more powerfully and artfully achieved. If, as gallery director Lawrence Rodriguez suggests, the show was meant to convey images of rage, the ones exhibited are extremely muted, often to the point of ineffectiveness.

The images of "hope and forgiveness," which Rodriguez observes were also part of his conception for the show, on the other hand, are so abstracted from the concrete situation as to seem unrelated to the Diallo case. In any event, hope based on what? Forgiveness of whom? "Ourselves," Rodriguez answered, but then admitted that Diallo's community was not responsible for the brutality of the NYPD or the reactionary social policies exposed in his killing.

The art work falls into three categories: photographs of Diallo's funeral procession in Harlem; paintings imagining the scene of the shooting; and other mixed media/sculptural pieces about Diallo's life and the themes of hope and forgiveness.

The photographs by Jim Carroll and Azrin Thomas have the most immediate impact. They were taken during Diallo's funeral procession in Harlem, which attracted masses of angry protesters against then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration and his police department. Giuliani's law-and-order campaign to improve the "quality of life"—for the benefit of the wealthy and the upper middle class, including a layer of the black elite, who benefited from the stock market boom of the 1990s—was characterized by the use of excessive and even deadly force, particularly against African-American and Hispanic young men. Unarmed and guilty of no crime, Diallo was shot 41 times in the entryway of his Bronx home.

The four policemen were later acquitted.

The photographs capture several key elements of the tragic event—not the shooting itself, but its aftermath. Primarily in black-and-white, the strongest of the photographs shows a sea of hands carrying Diallo's plain wooden coffin in the funeral procession to be shipped back to Guinea for burial. It communicates a sense of communal solidarity and outrage—some of the hands cannot reach the coffin, but touch other hands in a sort of kinetic grief. One hand in the foreground is raised in a fist.

Other photographs show the mourners; one photo by Azrin Thomas shows the crowd en masse waving printed placards provided by the protest's organizers, which say "I am a Person." And a disproportionately large number of photographs show black Democratic politicians officiating at the event—Reverend Al Sharpton, former New York City mayor David Dinkins and Democratic congressman Charles Rangel.

These images are presented uncritically; it is not clear to what extent the photographers understood the inter-relationship of these forces in the community—the sorrowful, angry crowd, on the one hand, and the well-groomed politicians channeling that anger into a dead end, on the other. (Far from having diminished as a result of the protests over Diallo's killing and other cases of abuse like Abner Louima's, police brutality against immigrants and minorities has continued to rise under Giuliani's successor Michael Bloomberg, up 15 percent from 2003 to 2004.)

Careful observation of reality goes a long way, but not quite the whole way, toward insight in artwork. If the photographers did understand these connections, how might they have been communicated more sharply, either in the perspectives of the shots themselves, their physical juxtaposition, or some other means? Significantly, any hint of satire directed at the pretensions of the black bourgeois politicians is absent. This is not unexpected, sadly.

The paintings and other pieces in the show are if anything less incisive than the photographs. Two paintings by Eric Alugas are painted on unstretched linen tacked to the wall. The larger of the two compositions, *Night Scene II* (1994), is of a woman and children in an open doorway. A body sprawls across the doorstep—presumably Diallo, but it could be

anyone's son or lover, friend or neighbor. The light streams out from behind the woman and children, who are painted in black and white while the body and the bullet-ridden doorframe are rendered in color.

Alugas carries over the stylized realism characteristic of folk and other "naïve" art forms into a freer, more complex composition—a technique pioneered in the work of African-American artists such as Jacob Lawrence, for example. Many early twentieth century modernist painters, who chose not to go the route of abstraction, adopted such an approach, in which physical space and the human figure are distorted, while retaining, even heightening, the depiction of reality. But here the style feels reflexive more than fully developed. As a result, it lacks a certain impact.

Another much smaller painting by Malcah Zeldis, *Amadou Diallo* (2002) is even more "naïve" in style. By reversing the traditional order of perspective, the tiny squad cars in the foreground and little cops are made to seem toy-like, shooting at Diallo, whose much larger figure looms like a giant in the doorway. A limited meaning can be deduced from this, but the naïve style in this case confines the painting on a decorative level.

Issues of decorativeness, the prevailing pressure on artists to be clever to the point of gimmicky with their media, or simply inadequately realized concepts detract from the rest of the work in this small show.

A case in point is Katrina Jeffries' fabric art triptych, *Sette* (2006). It combines appliquéd photographs with metallic beads forming outlines of the continents of Africa and the United States, and cowrie shells—traditionally used in African tribal art—arranged to suggest the short "journey" of Diallo's life. Explaining that Diallo was a "sette"—the term in Guinea for a young person who leaves home to become an explorer and envoy—Jeffries' piece is imbued with "ethnicity" on many levels. It is also eminently collectible, which brings one to the question of the show's intentions and audience.

The WSWs spoke with gallery director Lawrence Rodriguez. Asked about the origins of the idea for the exhibition, he said it came to him when he got the news that a young nephew was about to be shipped out to Iraq. He made the connection between the deaths on that battlefield, and the deaths on this other "unseen" battlefield—the streets of poor, working class communities in Harlem, where his gallery is located, or the Bronx, where Diallo was killed. But this was not a connection he thought the artists themselves had made, nor it is one, unfortunately, that is apparent in the show.

Speaking further of some of the difficulties in tackling these issues in truly convincing forms, Rodriguez pointed to the responsibility borne by a previous generation of artists who had come of age in the 1940s and 1950s such as Ed Clark, Berry Johnson, and Jack White. These and other, not exclusively African-American, artists who had entertained "left" ideas in the 1930s became disillusioned or demoralized during the

postwar boom in the US and turned away from socially critical art forms, retreating instead into a more "neutral" art-for-art's-sake. Clark, for instance, has been called an Abstract Impressionist, creating lyrical abstractions by swirling paint across the canvas with a push broom.

As a result, the present generation of artists finds itself a long distance from social and historical problems and is unprepared when confronted with a Diallo shooting. It is a distance artists can travel relatively quickly, provided impetus and clarity.

Another problem is raised by the show's orientation toward elements of the African-American political establishment who are among the museum's likely patrons. Rodriguez himself was critical of the politics of Dinkins, Rangel and Sharpton (whose church is located just two doors from the gallery). He said bluntly, "They'll never do anything to solve the social problems in this community," referring to the spread of AIDS, illiteracy, and juvenile incarceration. However, to criticize the Democratic Party and charlatans like Sharpton openly remains virtually taboo.

Therefore, the Casa Frela show, despite its good intentions, pulls its punches, intentionally or not. Its ambiguous encouragement of "hope and forgiveness" tends to divert the artists and gallery-goers from a rather more concrete task: looking squarely at the social processes responsible for the Diallo killing and the wretched conditions in which so many of New York City's working class residents find themselves.

All images provided courtesy of Casa Frela Gallery, www.casafrela.com

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