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En route from Brooklyn

Published on May 11, 2003

Some say that diamonds are a girl's best friend, and at first glance, Thai-American artist Skowmon Hastanan's exhibition "Les Femmes en Route" at Monk Gallery, in New York's SoHo, may lead the viewer to believe just that. Part of the show consists of technically polished light boxes made of plexiglass and fluorescent light that illuminate ink jet prints of finely cut diamonds (Diamond Girls, 2003) and glistening bubbles (Magnificent Journey, 2003).

These translucent compositions, floating in amorphous space, are pleasing to the senses. The luscious shapes in pinks, blues and greys could do well to grace a plush lounge or melt like sugar on one's tongue. They attack and recede from the eye like a 1960s Op painting.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, one realises that within each of the diamonds and bubbles is trapped a Barbie-like Thai hostess with a plastic smile. One looks again at the title of the show and reads the words underneath it: "A homage to women workers in the international tourist and entertainment industry".

Simple pleasure is quickly tempered by creepy unease. Suddenly, the densely-packed diamonds are no longer like whimsical prisms, but brooding camouflaged screening.

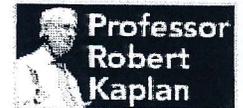
Skowmon has done her research on the harsh plight of women in the trade of sex and labour, but her subtle art does not deliver the information so readily. She sees herself as a visual artist and her brand of consciousness-raising, on a social and political level, is not as straightforward as an activist with a bullhorn taking to the streets.

That is not to say, however, that her work has less impact on anyone who would care to look closely. Skowmon spent her childhood in the shadow of the Vietnam War and saw how Thai women were ogled at and bought, whether in magazines or real flesh, by American GIs. Her memories from those years have impacted her as a human being and as a woman from Southeast Asia.

The recurring inkjet image of the Thai hostess in the exhibition is actually lifted from a Thai postage stamp. The hostess' pristine presence in conventional Thai dress may seem as precious as a glowing gem, but in the reality of women trafficking, she is closer to a mere bubble, to be popped for pleasure and then forgotten.

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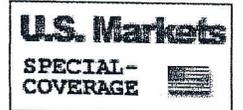


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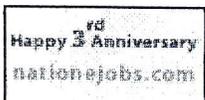
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Though Skowmon does not express herself so readily in words, one can flip through the pages of another piece in the show called "Encyclopaedia Britannica World Atlas (2002)" to find a visual journal of maps dotted by migrating shapes, from blobs to orchids, encapsulating tiny women workers who are literally dehumanised into mere spots on the hemisphere.

The "journal" is actually an atlas, published in 1960 as a misleading exercise in imperial "utopia" during the beginning of the Vietnam War. In a sense, she is purifying rather than corrupting the book with lyrical passages of truth. In addition, the mother of all her maps takes up one whole wall in the exhibition, entitled simply "The World (2002)".

Indeed, the world according to Skowmon is viewed on a Pacific-oriented map, which again exhibits inkjet figures of Thai women. But this time they are trapped in glittering drops linked together to form a silvery spider web. In these works, Skowmon alludes to the ubiquitous migration of women workers in the lucrative market of sex and labour.

Her "Fever Series (2000-3)" utilises Thai silk window mats to form the ground for compositions in ink jet and nail polish. In this collection, the figures of Thai hostesses are free from encapsulation, but they are still restricted in an unforgiving seriality.

In a more involved piece called "Red Fever (2000)", these hostesses form a lovely tapestry, a woven myriad of Thai Chakri period gowns. However, Skowmon parallels the lay out of their identical bodies, arranged like the seating in a plane, to the plan of the middle passage in an African slave ship.

Hence, she connects the current global trade of women to the plight of slave labour generations ago. To a viewer not well-informed in African slave history or iconography, these pieces may not have as much resonance as the light boxes.

The final light box in the exhibition is entitled "Graceful Travellers: Ruby, The Home Body: An Island Story (1999)". The multiplied prints of women workers are afloat in filmy layers of pinkish cellular forms that one might normally view through a microscope.

Skowmon is a grounded feminist but, unlike the shocking, hypercritical wave of Feminist Art in the US during the 1970s, she is decidedly more refined and restrained.

She strikes a well-informed balance in her exhibition. In this troubled world, many women are still "on the go," seeking for a way to break free from exploitation, for the right to be a human being. And Skowmon's message in their support rings clear.

Karen Demavivas

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