
Rico Gatson

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through May 29

A lot of young artists are mining the 1960's these days. Some focus on its trippy, rock-saturated visual culture. Others, like Rico Gatson, are into other things. His multipart video piece "History Lessons," projected on all four walls of the front gallery at Feldman, has the percussive pulse and flash of a light show. But the music it is keyed to is an early Bob Dylan protest song, "Only a Pawn in Their Game," written after the murder of Medgar Evers in pre-Flower Power 1963.

The song accompanies just one section of a 10-minute video composed of images of racial violence and racist stereotypes lifted from existing films, including W. D. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" (1915) and news clips of the Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965. Mr. Gatson has run all his material through a kind of digital blender, producing kaleidoscopic sequences that reveal their meaning only gradually. The perceptual delay is effective; it adds the suspense of discovery to a vision of history as a destructive form of popular entertainment.

If Mr. Gatson's approach is more than usually didactic, he also turns didacticism itself into a joke: the lyrics of the Dylan ballad are illustrated, phrase by phrase, with snappy images; like nursery rhymes on a children's television show. Given the shortness of historical memory

evident in American contemporary art, not to mention in the culture at large, this primer approach is altogether apt.

"Clandestine," the second part of the show, is made up primarily of all-white or all-black paintings, which look abstract from a distance but carry politically loaded images as reliefs made of lines of raised dots. One is a target; another an American flag; a third a skull and crossbones, the symbol for poison (and also for the secret society Skull and Bones, to which President Bush and Senator John Kerry belonged at Yale, where Mr. Gatson did graduate work).

He made effective use of this Minimalist-style painting as part of a video installation at Triple Candie last season. And there's no question that Minimalism's ideological dark side is ripe for serious probing. But the paintings at Feldman are too conceptually simplistic to make a forceful revisionist case.

In fact, "History Lessons" isn't revisionist either: basically, it gives us information we already know. But it is forceful; once you start looking, you have a hard time pulling back.

The same is true of Fred Wilson's extraordinary short film "September Song" (2003) at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Immediacy of involvement is one of the great formal advantages of film, and, as we're gradually learning, of digital art. Mr. Gatson, as historian and technician, is a master of both.

HOLLAND COTTER