

ART IN REVIEW

Cotter, Holland. "Pepon Osorio 'Transboricua.'" *The New York Times* July 16, 1999.

Pepón Osorio

'Transboricua'

*Youngworld Children's
Department Store
1915 Third Avenue, at 106th Street
East Harlem
Through July 25*

A few years ago, Pepón Osorio's installation "Badge of Honor" made its debut in a storefront in a working class neighborhood in Newark. The piece, based on a video dialogue between a Latino boy and his imprisoned father, later appeared at Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo and elsewhere. But the resonance it generated in its original setting was extraordinary.

Work by Mr. Osorio, who recently won a MacArthur grant and who participated in the 1993 Whitney biennial, often travels this route from the real world to the art world. "Transboricua" is the latest example of that process.

Created for a public library in Providence, R.I., and now installed in Youngworld Children's Department Store in East Harlem, the piece looks more streamlined than some of Mr. Osorio's previous installations — the amazing "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)" now installed at the Bronx Museum of the Arts is an example — but it is loaded with eye-catching symbolic detail.

It starts with a huge cage of cyclone fencing set amid the store's racks of bright "Hot Summer Fun" clothes. A mannequinlike figure is locked inside: a man wearing a dark suit, a broad-brimmed hat, a small backpack and boxing gloves, his face entirely swathed in patterned cloth. He stands on pink clay patio tiles surrounded by green plastic ground cover. A microphone is in front of him, and a stuffed peacock is nearby.

Every aspect of the piece is coded with meaning. The cage suggests both confinement and protection; the backpack is a sign of someone on the move. The man's glitter-covered hat carries the Puerto Rican national emblem, his face is covered by a Mexican flag and his boxing gloves are emblazoned with the official insignia of the Dominican Republic. He looks imposing and combative, but the music he appears to sing into the microphone (it is actually piped in from elsewhere) is a 1940's Puerto Rican lament about a man returning empty-handed from a long and arduous journey.

The dozens of cartoon eyes sewn to the man's suit echo the patterns on the tail of the peacock, and the motif is picked up in dozens of photographic pins, each carrying the portrait of a child. Before the pictures were taken, Mr. Osorio had asked the children to imagine what they might look like 50 years in the future, and they faced the camera with eyes closed, as if they were lost in thought. A single pair of eyes appears on a little video implanted in the man's backpack. Their pupils take the form of a world globe.

Installed under the direction of the curator Julia P. Herzberg, "Transboricua" is about many things. The title implies the idea of transition or transformation, one directly pertinent to the East Harlem setting: the barrio, once largely Puerto Rican, is now home to other Latino populations, a mix that has produced territorial tensions.

As Ms. Herzberg points out in a flyer, the piece also addresses a broader picture. Despite a history of poverty, America's Hispanic population does its share to keep a double-edged consumerist economy afloat. (Youngworld is evidence of that.) But that economy is reducing ethnic diversity to a global culture in which everyone is, to some degree, spiritually homeless.

Mr. Osorio manages to imbed all of this into his installation without making a big deal of any of it, and, most important, without sacrificing visual flair. And "Transboricua" will make its leap out of the community into the art world next fall. It will be installed in the Museo del Barrio on Fifth Avenue at 104th Street in September, where it will take on another, different, though surely no less dynamic life.

HOLLAND COTTER