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A snow-cone cart and crutches comprise Pepon Osorio's *Lonely Soul*. Menil curator Franklin Sirmans, pictured, sees the work as a hybrid.

SHARON STEINMANN: CHRONICLE

June 20, 2008, 11:05AM

## NeoHooDoo

Faith and ritual in art of the Americas

By DOUGLAS BRITT

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### NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith

**When:** 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays; Friday through Sept. 21. Preview 6:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** The Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross

**Details:** Free; 713-525-9400

[A new Menil exhibit explores the world of NeoHooDoo](#)

Pepón Osorio has just finished assembling *Lonely Soul*, an installation he's created for *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, in one of the Menil Collection's galleries.

It's a snow-cone cart propped up by dozens of crutches. Inside, a mannequin's head represents Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman sentenced to death by stoning after an Islamic Shariah court found her guilty of adultery. The mannequin head is

surrounded by ice and red Styrofoam flames, along with bottles of snow-cone flavors whose colors correspond to Catholic saints and Yoruba deities.

She's guarded by a small resin sculpture representing Anima Sola, an iconic figure with Catholic and Yoruban devotees in Latin America. During the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, "Anima gave water to the thieves (on the crosses next to Christ) and not to Jesus, so she was sentenced to purgatory," Osorio says. "I love purgatory, because I was afraid of being burned (in hell), and I knew that I wasn't good enough — when I was a kid and learning about this stuff — to go to heaven."

Anima Sola's job is to make sure the head of the mannequin — whose real-life counterpart was spared from execution after international protests — has enough water to drink.

Osorio, who grew up in Puerto Rico and lives in Philadelphia, says the piece touches on ideas of pilgrimage, the religious persecution of women and the conflict between deeply felt and institutionally imposed notions of faith.

"You have this strong idea in your mind of what you think is your belief system, and then you have this outside imposition telling you what is supposed to be, and they both contrast. They're both in struggle all the time."

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Although *NeoHooDoo* is about ritual and spirituality in contemporary art of the Americas, the shadows of other continents loom heavily over Osorio's piece and the rest of the exhibition.

"This space in the world is so much a hybrid," Franklin Sirmans, the Menil's curator of modern and contemporary art, says of the Americas. "Africa has this huge presence in the New World, and it's a transformation presence. It's obviously not the same as it is in Africa. It's changed. But why? It's because of the European tradition; it's because of Asian traditions; it's because of the Native American tradition, which was already there, but now it's this mix-up."

Toby Kamps, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, says shows like *NeoHooDoo* — along with CAMH's *The Old, Weird America* — are tapping into artists' return to folk and spiritual themes. Those themes, he says, resonate particularly strongly during periods of war and economic uncertainty.

"During times of stress, it's natural to fall back on your culture's master narratives," he says. "In a time when so much of the mainstream messages we get about identity, spirituality or history — or politics, for that matter — seem very inauthentic, it's natural for everyone, artists especially, to dig for a deeper meaning or message."

The word "hoodoo" dates from 1875 and refers to cultural and spiritual practices that originated in precolonial West Africa. In 1969, American poet, essayist and novelist Ishmael Reed coined the term "neo-hoodoo" to refer to the use of ritualism in contemporary art.

"Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist, and every artist a priest," Reed wrote in his poem *Neo-HooDoo Manifesto*. The works in the Menil show date from

shortly before Reed's poem appeared in *Conjure*, his 1972 collection of poetry, to the present and reflect a similarly inclusive spirit.

In many cases, they also reflect what Reed has described as the imperative to "use a variety of materials, modes of expression and allusions from many different cultures, both popular and traditional. Africans in America had few resources and had to make do with what was available. That's neo-hoodoo in a nutshell."

Sirmans points to *Columna Infinita*, a sculpture by Cuban artist Kcho, as an example of making do with what's available. Like several other pieces in the show, it references Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* — a memorial to Romanian soldiers killed in World War I — but Kcho's column is made from found motorboat propellers.

"It sort of relates to the culture of necessity of Cuba — being able to make something out of nothing," Sirmans says.

Vancouver, British Columbia-based Brian Jungen's *1990* and *2010*, two totem poles made of golf bags and cardboard tubes, also echo Brancusi's *Endless Column* but relate more directly to Jungen's indigenous Pacific Northwest Coast ancestry.

Despite being made from commodities — like similar sculptures he has made using Nike shoes — Jungen's poles appear to contain faces resembling those of Northwest Coast masks that can be found in the Menil Collection, Sirmans says.

An untitled 1989 sculpture by David Hammons is made of Thunderbird wine bottles glued together to form a circle, another recurring motif in the show.

"I think for Hammons in particular, it's sort of this idea of community within a circle — this idea that we gather around, come to the plate," Sirmans says.

Other circles in the exhibition include the Brazilian artist Marepe's *Auréolas/Halo*.

"(Marepe's) idea of a halo comes from these industrial lights that are found in Bahia, where he's from," says Sirmans. "It looks almost neonish."

Lest anyone think *NeoHooDoo* consists entirely of found objects, Sirmans points out that another circle in the show, James Lee Byars' *The Halo*, is made of gilded brass. Byars' piece is an example of "that absolute, that pure — for lack of a better word — minimal space" that visitors readily associate with the Menil, Sirmans says.

"You can stand in front of a work of art and take your mind different places, but it requires a certain degree of stillness and slowness, which at the Menil is something that we strive for," he says. "It also makes it easy to find those sorts of resonances when you've got the Rothko Chapel down the street."

Sirmans originally conceived of *NeoHooDoo* as an exhibition for P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, N.Y., where he serves as a curatorial consultant. Josef Helfenstein, the Menil's director, suggested also presenting the show at the Menil and encouraged Sirmans to search the collection for artworks that might fit.

"When (John and Dominique de Menil) first started collecting art, they were being advised by a priest (Marie-Alain Couturier), " Sirmans says. "That whole idea (is)

that art is for other things — it has many different meanings and levels of appreciation."

Of the 33 artists participating in the exhibition, six — Byars, Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Cage, Robert Gober, George Smith and Michael Tracy — have work in the Menil Collection.

Had the exhibition not evolved into a joint Menil/P.S.1 show, "I might not even have been thinking of people like Cage," Sirmans says.

Primarily known as an avant-garde composer, Cage is represented by two watercolors from his *River Rocks and Smoke* series. Influenced by Zen philosophy, Cage prepared rag paper with fire and smoke and used river rocks to guide his brush strokes as he created the chance-driven works.

The collaboration between institutions also allowed Sirmans, a former independent curator who joined the Menil in September 2006, to expose Menil audiences to younger artists he's worked with before, including San Antonio-based Dario Robleto and William Cordova, a recent Glassell School Core Fellow.

"To think about the context in which some of the younger artists play out here was interesting, because at P.S.1, it's like Robleto, Cordova — guys that are their age are showing there all the time," Sirmans says. "To think about Dario next to Gober and to think about William next to (artist and activist) Jimmie Durham was something that happened here. I might not have been thinking about that (at P.S.1)."

Cordova's piece, *the house that frank lloyd wright built for atahualpa*, has been created especially for *NeoHooDoo*. It's made from gold and silver chains along with a structure built from found wooden sheets taken from various sites.

One of those sites is the Chicago house where Black Panther Fred Hampton was killed in 1969. Another is in Peru, Cordova's native country, where Atahualpa, the last sovereign Incan emperor, is said to have been killed by the Spanish in the 16th century.

"Don't ask me how he's gotten that," Sirmans says.

Cordova's piece is one of many in the show that engage political themes. Others include Radcliffe Bailey's 2007 installation *Storm at Sea* — which sets model ships and an African sculpture of Ogun, a Yoruba god of war — on a sea of piano keys, evoking the "middle passage" of slave ships between Africa and the New World.

In the video *150,000 Voltios*, Regina José Galindo, a Guatemalan living in the Dominican Republic, depicts herself being hit with a stun gun. In *Confession*, she undergoes water torture.

Doris Salcedo's elegiac piece *Atrabiliarios* presents shoes — representing "disappeared" victims of political violence in her native Colombia — sewn into a niche in the gallery wall.

"Who knows what happened to the person who was in those shoes?" Sirmans asks.

Healing, like mourning, is another undercurrent in the exhibition.

"It just came along so perfectly that Franklin would be doing this show," says Amalia Mesa-Bains, who's creating her installation *The Curandera's Botanica* partly as a way to get "closure" since suffering a severe car accident that broke a vertebra in her neck five years ago.

During the period surrounding the accident, which the Monterey, Calif.-based Mesa-Bains describes as "a busy time," her parents died, her sister suffered a stroke and her husband had cancer.

"It provoked me to think about (physical) healing, but also the healing of the spirit and the *curanderismo*, which is the Mexican religious worldview of healing," she says, adding that the accident caused what is traditionally described as *susto*, in which "the soul is either dislodged or disrupted in some way."

"Part of the process of healing is both physical and spiritual, and you have to have help," she says.

Mesa-Bains' "botanica" includes a table and medical cabinet stocked with family photographs, an art book with stories of healing and objects drawn from Mexican folk-healing traditions, including *milagros*, botanical elements and a dried hummingbird.

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In the space adjacent to where Mesa-Bains works, Osorio walks around his freshly completed *Lonely Soul*, snapping photos. As he shoots, he recalls visiting a shrine to the Virgin of Montserrat in Puerto Rico.

"There was a beautiful offering of a diaper, a disposable diaper, with handwriting on it about the kid who was sick," he says. "It was right there on the altar. It was so beautiful, and there were thousands and thousands of crutches."

Osorio says he often leaves group exhibitions "feeling that I don't know what I'm doing here." But the inclusive sensibility of *NeoHooDoo* makes him feel differently about this show.

"When we learned from early ages about spirituality, we were not given many choices," he says. "The interesting thing that I'm seeing here is that there are a lot of options. There's the possibility that all these different choices and conclusions can come together, and they can all be under one roof."

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