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How the other half lives

Two homes, two communities go on display in Williams College exhibit

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | October 3, 2010

NORTH ADAMS — The first thing Pepón Osorio noticed when he came to town to work on his art installation "Drowned in a Glass of Water" was how different this artsy but beleaguered old industrial city is from its immediate neighbor, Williamstown, a manicured college town that has dubbed itself "the village beautiful."

"Homes in Williamstown were a little more separated from the street," Osorio observed. "In North Adams, there's a shortening of that space, more accessibility to the interior of the homes."

Distinctions both subtle and obvious drive "Drowned in a Glass of Water," which spent the summer inside a former Chevy dealership amid the old brick industrial buildings on the eastern side of town. On Sept. 25, the exhibit officially reopened at the Williams College Museum of Art, which commissioned the project.

Taking a break from preparing the installation for its move to the museum last month, Osorio settled down at a table just inside the Chevy dealer's door to talk about the project, which was prompted by an invitation to the museum from *Gastronomica*, the food journal. The installation is about two communities, but Osorio got to know those communities around kitchen tables.

"I ate a lot. I'm on a diet now," said Osorio, 55, a gregarious, Puerto Rican-born artist whose home is now Philadelphia. "We had communal meals in people's homes. Organic food and Cheez Doodles."

Shared meals were only the starting point for "Drowned in a Glass of Water."

"It wasn't necessary for the work of art to be about eating," says Lisa Corrin, director of the Williams College Museum. "Symbolically, it's about breaking bread and getting to know each other."

Osorio approaches his work with an anthropologist's eye. He has won a MacArthur fellowship for his art, which often involves spending weeks or months in conversation with a community before he creates an artwork that portrays it. "Drowned in a Glass of Water" takes a magic-realist approach to examining what Williamstown and North Adams share and how they differ. The piece spins on an 18-foot turntable with a wall down the middle.

"I wanted to contrast and revolve, so that it's not either-or, but we see [both sides] simultaneously," Osorio said. After months of meeting locals, Osorio chose to focus on one family from each town. The Williamstown family is represented on one side of the wall, and the North Adams family on the other. Objects and materials tell the family's stories: The Williamstown family's father died of cancer. The North Adams family was served an eviction notice, fought back, and stayed in their home.

Astroturf carpets the Williamstown side, and there's a swimming pool, but there's also a gurney on the lawn, denoting the loss of the father. That side of the wall is mirrored, reflecting the viewer and surroundings. The North Adams side features a living room crowded with figures and objects — including a mannequin in a gaudy, pink, hand-crocheted dress that looks like a birthday cake, several toy police cars, and a wheelchair.

When Osorio visited the North Adams family, he said, "I sat in the living room and I started to see wheelchairs everywhere. I didn't say anything. Then, at the end, I said, 'What's up with the wheelchairs?' 'Oh,' the mother said, 'that's

my grandfather.’ ”

The man was a Williamstown resident who had lost all his money and ended up in North Adams, Osorio said.

A video showing on the television in the North Adams section shows water rising and receding. It hints at some kind of threat — such as the chance that the family might have been evicted. “They’re drowning in a glass of water,” Osorio said.

Straddling the class divide between North Adams and Williamstown, the work has generated intrigue and discomfort in some viewers. Across the street from the Chevy dealership, at the Crystal Hard Hat Saloon, bar owner Todd Hebert kept an eye on the project over the summer.

“It’s off the wall,” said Hebert, a burly, bearded man with the easy manner of a friendly neighborhood barkeep. “I’ve seen people walk over and look at it. People won’t go in during the day, but they stop by at night and look through the windows.”

Hebert said he was a fine arts major in college, so he gets it, but he’s not sure about the wall in the middle of the turntable. “Williamstown and North Adams are the same. A couple of miles different,” he said. “Williamstown is a little prettier. It’s like a \$1,000 dress on a woman instead of a \$100 dress. They look the same. But this one [North Adams] is spending the other \$900 on what’s really needed.”

Setting up an art installation in an old Chevy dealership shattered a lot of expectations. People interacted with it differently than they would have in a museum. Every day, museum staff sat in the dealership and found themselves in conversation with visitors.

“Each person who came in had a question. ‘This is art?’ ‘What is this supposed to be?’ ” Corrin said. A museum, she pointed out, offers a more quiet, introspective experience. When she spent a few hours at the dealership, a woman came in with her autistic son. Corrin offered to watch the boy as his mother took in the installation.

“She said, ‘I like this piece. I really understand the relationship between the two families. I know a family in Williamstown with an autistic child,’ ” Corrin reported. “They might think they have nothing else in common, but the disability had brought them together.”

Osorio carefully guards the identities of both families, and wouldn’t allow a reporter to talk with them.

“I have a theory that working-class people are more willing to have their lives opened up. They are more susceptible,” he said. In Williamstown, he added, “people are reserved and cautious of having an artist turn them inside out and tell their stories in public.”

He invited both families in to view the installation privately before it opened. “I needed their blessing,” Osorio said.

Ashley Benson, a social worker working with the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition who helped Osorio find the North Adams family, says they enjoyed the opening. “The mother was absolutely thrilled and taken aback,” she said. “She was very proud, but also I think she felt like she had contributed to the community.”

The Williamstown woman, Osorio said, was a little put off by the implication of a divide. “She thought it was elegant and recognized it as her own space,” Osorio said. “But she didn’t like the wall. She wanted it knocked down. She didn’t see that much separation between the two places.”

For Osorio, the division between the communities may be an illusion — that’s why he has them set up on a turntable, so they appear to mix and meld, and why the wall is mirrored.

He doesn’t see one side as better off than the other. “People accumulate and accumulate, and there’s a fear of emptiness,” he noted. He could have been talking about the opulence in his rendering of Williamstown, or the jam-packed North Adams living room. “Both places,” he said, “are extremely beautiful.”

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