

Smith, Roberta. "Pepon Osorio."
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Pepón Osorio

*Ronald Feldman Gallery
31 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through Oct. 19*

"Face to Face," Pepón Osorio's latest site-specific transposition venture into the belly of the beast of bureaucracy, examines its human manifestations, aspirations and costs. Fittingly, the bureaucracy's focus is the family itself; the work was made during a yearlong residency at the Philadelphia Department of Human Services.

The setting is a bleak, meticulously recreated office where desks are veritable self-portraits, festooned with family snapshots and memorabilia. Mr. Osorio exaggerates this folk-artish practice to shrine status by adding ceramic figures, action heroes and snow globes that sharpen the awareness of social and racial stereotyping (our own included). Silent images of distressed children flicker like ghosts on the computer screens.

A huge cage stores the belongings of a real family in the "process of transition," including a monitor playing a home video of a boy's first birthday, which is festive yet subtly distressing. Finally, the audio portion: a tape of a not-too-promising counseling session between a caseworker and a mother worried about her fatherless son, an emotionally cut-off teenager who is about to become a father himself.

Like Mr. Osorio's best works, "Face to Face" achieves a kind of total immersion. It favors the documentary over the decorative, which is new for him and less visually satisfying, and it raises questions about substituting the power of reality for that of art. Still, this piece is an enormous collage that weaves together different sites and stages of family life with an immediacy that is beyond documentary, literature or theater. It creates a saddening glimpse of life's complexity that is very hard to shake.

A second work, a giant piñatalike heart wired with the sound of the artist's heartbeat, attempts optimism, but it is no match.

ROBERTA SMITH