

NEWARK

Pepón Osorio at 33 Broadway and the Newark Museum

Badge of Honor, Pepón Osorio's two-room installation originally sited at a rented storefront in a Latino neighborhood of downtown Newark, confronted one of the starkest—and metaphorically richest—forms of family separation: a father's imprisonment. Indeed, the first room was an ersatz jail cell, complete with a standard-issue bunk, bleak walls, a white plastic pail and iron bars. One pristine pair of sneakers and a single change of clothes, lying folded on the bed, reinforced the sense of austere solitude.

The adjoining room, done in the artist's signature kitsch-fantasia fashion, evoked the bedroom retreat of a teenaged son. Walls papered with baseball cards were hung with NBA and Bruce Lee posters. Trophies served as bedside lamps. Basketballs, held in hand-shaped brackets, protruded from the walls. Gold-painted fists (originally auto air fresheners) studded the bed frame and nearby shelves. Multiple pairs of sneakers, in various styles and colors, lined one side of the room. The floor, covered in mirrored tile, doubled the scene in a kaleidoscopic effect.

On the wall of the prison appeared a haunting video projection: the black-and-white visage of a man who was actually serving time for a drug-related burglary. The face of his real-life son, a reticent 15-year-old, appeared simultaneously in the ornate bedroom. Conversation between the two, alternately taped as Osorio ferried back and forth between the family home and North State Penitentiary, centered on familial love and obligation—and their potential ruin.

The man, despite a shortage of teeth and the institutional air of

someone who has spent large portions of his adult life in jail, is impressively articulate. Speaking of his feelings for his wife and child, he seems perceptive, caring and emotionally astute. His son, though less open and fluent, tethers the exchange to the core problem of his father's *being there*. What, he implicitly asks, can prompt a man to pass more of his days in prison than outside with his family?

Born of African descent in Puerto Rico, Osorio moved to the South Bronx in 1975 at the age of 20 and spent five years as an anti-child-abuse worker for the Human Resources Administration. Recently, seeking to duplicate the immediacy of projects like his 1991 retrospective at El Museo del Barrio [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '91] and his "murder scene" at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, he spent several months conferring with activist groups in the Newark community. *Badge of Honor*, co-organized by the Newark Museum and the Aljira contemporary art center, has now been relocated to the museum, where it remains on view through Dec. 31. —Richard Vine



Pepón Osorio: Installation view of *Badge of Honor*, 1994; at the Newark Museum.