

## PEPÓN OSORIO

When viewing "Badge of Honor" your eyes have to swerve quickly to capture every reference encapsulated in every excessive detail. Relatively simple, the design of the installation space consists of two rooms divided by a wall: on the left, a bare jail cell; on the right, a teenager's extravagant bedroom. In each chamber, a video projection plays one side of an edited interview that Pepón Osorio did with a jailed father and his son, who lives with his mother in a nearby town. With a little change in the angle of vision, this setup, using the two opposite sides of the same story, transports the audience from one reality to another.

First presented in a storefront in an Hispanic and black community of Newark, and now on view at the Newark Museum, "Badge of Honor" fastforward-rewinds between two realities: the cell and the bedroom, here and there. It carries the viewer to that intermediary world where nothing is true or false.

As a result of this disorientation, we realize how real events can be narrated in a manner that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction — a legacy of the magical realism in Latin American literature. As defined by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, magical realism, *lo real maravilloso*, combines the events of everyday life with a imaginary vision of Latin American geography and history. In the writings of Mexican Carlos Fuentes and Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, magical realism, with its rejection of the documentary approach of realist fiction, has overthrown conventional assumptions about the nature of truth. Thus it has subverted the genre's conventional Eurocentrism as it reflects the rationalist cultural tradition of the West.

*El real maravilloso* has the same effect in Osorio's art, which reveals one strong component of his hereditary blueprint — the baroque heritage. This is Osorio's strongest connection to his Latin homeland. He carries the gene of "baroque reason" which encompass what Richard Alewyn calls "theatricalized existence" — or the intention to seduce the senses and to create an intermediary world, a metaphorical space where the "visible/invisible and invisible/visible co-habited." In Osorio's art, theatricalization of existence is manifested via a multiplicity of points of vision, opulence and orna-



BADGE OF HONOR, 1995. VIEW OF THE FATHER'S PRISON CELL.



BADGE OF HONOR, 1995. VIEW OF THE SON'S BEDROOM.

mentation, and the infusion of static images with implied motion. Although Osorio says that he does not create art to upset aesthetic categories, his theatricalizing use of media technology disrupts standard rules of representation and presentation in art, much as the implementation of curves was a breakthrough in the baroque aesthetic.

Osorio favors excess. His layered and rich art reflects a multifaceted identity derived from Latin America's hybrid history and culture, Puerto Rico's popular taste, his Latino experience on the mainland, and his awareness of new aesthetic possibilities in the First World. Particularly in-

trigued by the question of how media technology can enhance contemporary art, unlike many artists who use technology as an aesthetic end in itself, Osorio employs it as an antidote for the flatness of the media. What fascinates in Osorio's work is how such weighty theoretical notions enter in his art through flair, drollery, and ornament.

**Berta Sichel**

*For Berta Sichel the work of Pepón Osorio is always a surprise. We find ourselves constantly switching between the level of action in which sensorial functions occur and the level of fantasy in which we live our imaginative life.*