

Sichel, Berta. "Millions of Colors."
afterimage (January/February 2000): 18.

MILLIONS OF COLORS

Las Twines
by Pepon Osorio
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
New York, New York
September 14-October 9, 1999

BERTA M. SICHEL

Almost a year after its initial exposure in a storefront in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, 1999 MacArthur Fellow Pepon Osorio's installation "Las Twines" (1998) (Spanglish for "twin girls") arrived in Manhattan at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery. A theatrical, peculiar and powerful piece, it comments on the blending of races in the Latino community and broaches the subject of racism.

Osorio's layered and personal art reflects a multifaceted identity derived from Latin America's hybrid history and culture and Puerto Rico's popular taste. Osorio insists that he does not create art to disrupt traditional aesthetic notions or use electronic media as an aesthetic end in itself, but incorporates cultural icons with electronic media to communicate a social message. These inclusions are charged with purpose and innovation despite the disturbing effect this excess might have on a more traditional gaze.

Darker, more somber and even more ascetic than some of Osorio's exuberantly decorated works such as "Badge of Honor" (1995) or "La Barberia," (1994) "Las Twines" has its own subtle brilliance. The piece centers on two sculpted figures of girls with identical features but differ-

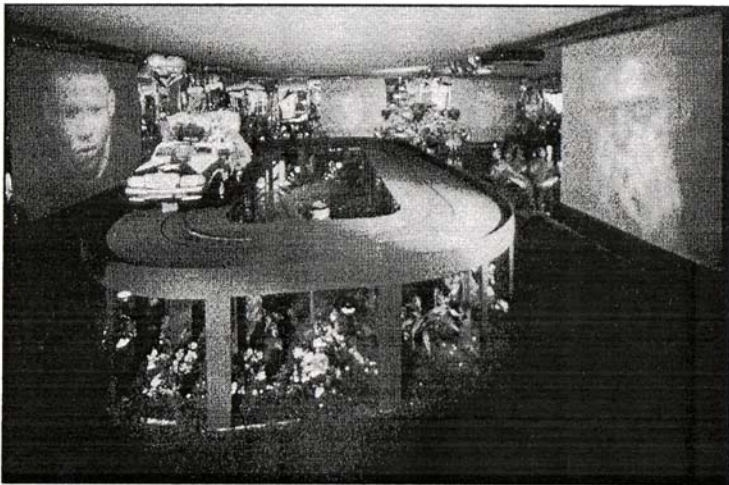
ent skin colors and hair textures: one is white and the other is black—not an atypical situation for sisters in countries where races have been mixing for generations. Dressed in white Sunday dresses and sitting on an iron bar suspended in the air, the twin dolls have a somewhat ghostly look. The installation includes an ornamented

toy car traveling recklessly through the space on a rased track and tells of the sisters' desire to find their father and their identity. To convey this further, the voices of the girls are heard every few minutes repeating, "Papa, Papa."

Laterally across the gallery's mirrored walls, three video projections show images of three

teenage boys who live in Hunts Point and worked with Osorio on the original installation. Placed close to the ceiling on different walls, three flat video monitors exhibit close-ups of a white teenager's face covered with thick black make-up and two black teenagers' faces covered with white make-up. In slow motion, the teenagers wash their faces, allowing their real skin color to appear. There are no cuts, no special effects, only these straightforward, almost documentary images that bring a sense of reality to Osorio's metaphorical story. The placement of the video monitors force the viewer's eyes to move through the space in order to capture different racial accounts of the same story. In addition to the monitors inside the gallery, another was placed in a darkened front window. Facing the street and supported by a golden frame, the monitor displayed the image of a black teenager. This moving portrait attracted the attention of people passing by and local residents filled the guest book Osorio placed in the gallery with personal stories regarding racial issues.

The objects used in the installation make specific cultural references. Filling the rest of the space, arrangements resembling gift baskets were filled with various objects charged with meaning from boxes of hair relaxer cream to colorful plastic balloons printed with popular Puerto Rican sayings about race. Osorio endows this installation with a multiplicity of points of vision, opulence and ornamentation, and infuses static images with implied motion.



Installation view of "Las Twines" (1998) by Pepon Osorio.

BERTA M. SICHEL is an art writer and media curator living in New York.