

The New York Times

Sunday, December 4, 2005

ART, CLOSE READING

All Hail the Mighty SpongeBob ArtPants

WHEN Larry Mantello bought his first SpongeBob SquarePants item -- a pair of slippers -- in 2003, he was clueless. He didn't know the name of the four-cornered yellow creature with the skewed grin. He had never heard of the wildly popular television cartoon. And he was unaware that some vigilant congressmen, forsaking the option of don't ask, don't tell, had accused SpongeBob of being a bit swishy, and therefore a poor role model for children. Mr. Mantello simply liked the look.

By the time his friends brought him up to date, SpongeBob was already the star of his "Tri-Sectional Resurrectional," a characteristically delirious homage to popular culture that is the centerpiece of his current show at Kustera Tilton Gallery in Chelsea, through Dec. 10.

Typically, Mr. Mantello fully exploits his subject: SpongeBob as cheerful formal element, adored icon, consumer product and political hero. And there is the usual interplay of ideas and mores, seductive on the outside and somewhat more acid within. Not surprisingly, Homer Simpson, cartoonland's terminally straight token Neanderthal, puts in several appearances, as does the Jamaican singer Bob Marley, whose image is ubiquitous in shops along West 125th Street in Harlem, where Mr. Mantello lives.

It could be said that Mr. Mantello shops until he Pops, amassing quantities of the cheap, the brightly colored and the pleasure-oriented, which he then alters, subverts and combines into an eye-jangling pi? of meaning. He likes the fact that his art costs almost nothing to make. Whatever labor is involved -- this time, lots of sewing -- he does himself.

All of the objects, toys, textiles and party decorations amalgamated into "Tri-Sectional Resurrectional" were bought on 125th Street, at the Astor Place Kmart, at a store called Wings in Miami (a city he doesn't like, but visits annually to work for the print publisher Gemini G.E.L. at the Miami Basel Art Fair) or in the markets of San Jos?Costa Rica, where he had an artist's residency in 2003.

The range of items, from mass-produced to handicrafts, evokes global, local and tourist cultures and touches on issues of race, materialism and sexual identity. The piece is also a savvy fusion of 1970's Process Art, the 1980's Neo Geo form of commodity critique and 1990's identity politics, with a sense of excess that is pure -- or more precisely, impure -- Mantello.

-ROBERTA SMITH



1. SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS IN GLORY, ASCENSION OR THE MANGER -- In the position of the central deity, SpongeBob wears a baseball uniform and lolls in a hammock in front of several layers of South American textiles.

2. HOMER SIMPSON GUARDIAN FIGURES -- Poorly disguised with dreadlocks over either blond (left) or magenta (right) wigs and Peruvian knit hats as helmets, Homer offers protection.

3. SOCK PUPPETS GALORE -- Stuffed socks, pantyhose and long scarves -- all-purpose Mantello symbols of excess -- protrude from all sorts of places, including the mouths of the Homer Guardian Figures, often evoking snakes or dragons. A row of four in black-and-white checkered pantyhose form a limp chorus line.

4. SEE-THROUGH -- Mr. Mantello makes extensive use of semi-transparent fabrics and garments, like this pair of white drawstring pants; in each leg, a SpongeBob with rabbit ears sits on a bed of cotton balls.

5. SPONGEBABETTE -- SpongeBob in drag, perhaps for Halloween, wears a polka-dot red skirt with a dragonfly for a hair bow and forms a totem or exquisite corpse with two jokey Italian aprons (female nudes with male hands covering the crotch, like Cranach's Adam and Eve).

6. BOOGIE UP -- The upper regions of the work are festooned with boogie boards, some covered with SpongeBob fabric; most serve as platforms for wastebaskets cum lampshades or, in this case, a SpongeBob cookie tin with a Jamaican headband around its rim.

7. ABOUT BOB -- The largest Bob Marley portrait, a rug overlaid with semi-transparent silk, evokes two of Mr. Mantello's heroes, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. Many items are in the colors of the Jamaican flag, including long swags of marijuana leaves.

8. TURN UP THE HEAT -- Among the various tourist wares are pirate heads, made from coconuts, and clusters of Costa Rican rattles. With the marijuana leaves and the dragon flies, they add junglelike specifics to the tropical atmosphere.

9. LOWER DEPTHS -- On a mirrored base, exposed pastel electrical cords and casually displayed fluorescent lights pay homage to Process Art's dedication to exposed hardware. Also here are six SpongeBob CD-players of various grinning designs, playing different Broadway hits. (Not surprisingly, this piece comes with its own sound.)

10 . SPONGEBOB COMES OUT FOR GAY MARRIAGE -- Or sleeps in, with a more debauched, morning-after version of himself (note bulging bloodshot eyes), beneath a SpongeBob blanket backed by an American flag.