

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday, October 11, 2007

Subject: Visit to Schomburg Center, Stereotypes and Humantypes exhibit  
Location: Schomburg Center, Lenox Ave at 135<sup>th</sup> St (515 Malcolm X Blvd)  
Time: 2:30-4:00pm

I went this morning to the garden where the home-schooling group is supposed to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the gate was chained and locked! On my way home I saw a man talking to a middle-aged cocoa-colored woman outside another garden. When I walked by I could tell it was Willie Morgan, who I had met on the garden tour. However, I was not brave enough to interrupt their conversation and stop and say hello.

I did see the massive Harriet Tubman statue in the triangle between 121<sup>st</sup>, 122<sup>nd</sup>, St. Nicholas, and Douglass, including the roots coming out of the back of her dress.

I had seen a large banner outside of the gleaming Schomburg center when I went on the art tour (HOAST), advertising the show “Stereotypes and Humantypes.” I had read about this show elsewhere, can’t remember when. On the way there it was raining.

When I got to the building a young white woman was in front of me. She opened the door and stopped short. I almost ran into her. She apologized and stepped aside. We both messed around with our umbrellas. I followed her inside. On the right a high counter held flyers for various events in and out of the Center: “Black, Latino, Both: AfroLatinos and the Current Immigration Debate” at the Center, “Nubian Women’s Art Circle Tenth Annual Circle of Art Awards Reception” at Bank Street (\$40 donation), “BlackArt Treasures from the Schomburg” at the Latimer/Edison Gallery at the Center. I also picked up the pamphlet for the exhibit.

On our left was a desk with a woman dressed in a dark (blue?) blazer, white shirt, and gray pants. She was talking with someone, possibly a staff member. A third person stood at the desk (not sure if they were participating in the conversation). The white woman stuck her umbrella into a metal contraption and pulled it out in a plastic bag. I followed suit.

Behind us a dark-skinned woman came in. “Can I help you,” the security guard called. “I think I’m in the wrong building,” she declared. I can’t say why but she didn’t seem high-class enough for the building—clothing, the way she carried herself. I went to the desk and asked about the Stereotypes/Humantypes exhibit, and was directed to walk down the hall and up the stairs. I did not think to see where the white woman went.

On my way to the gallery I picked up the pamphlet for the Center. I passed a small gift shop at the top of the stairs. To the left sat a plump dark-skinned woman, wearing the same uniform as the security guard at the front desk. She saw that I already had a pamphlet for the show. She handed me a piece of cardboard printed with images from the exhibit and of the center, mounted on a thin piece of wood. When I looked confused, she told me I could fan myself with it and demonstrated. I smiled. She told me not to touch

83P

525

526

anything, or lean on any of the exhibits. I agreed. I could not recognize her accent, which sounded vaguely African and French.

Inside the sounds of a video installation loudly mixed with the conversation of two women, who were out of sight in the inner room. I browsed through the outer room, which comprised the “stereotypes” half of the exhibit with anything depicting dark-skinned, wide-lipped Mammys, coons, sexpots, etc to advertise everything from molasses to Camembert. There was also a box of Darkie toothpaste and the Darlie version, from China. Quotes from luminaries such as Maya Angelou were interspersed with these images, providing some welcome relief. From Bishop Desmond Tutu, something like, Be nice to whites, they are depending on you to rediscover their humanity. The exhibit’s signs explained that blacks began writing and performing minstrelsy.

While I was in the “stereotypes” room, the security guard came in briefly. We exchanged greetings before she strolled into the next room.

The next room was a welcome change, with “positive” images comprising the Humantypes section of the exhibit. The left side of the room included advertisements that had won some sort of award, which depicted black professionals and beautiful women in soft light. These ads, relentless in their uplifting images and text, point to how much upliftingness was needed to humanize blacks in the public image.

The video installation cycled through a discussion of racist images, revisiting the Imus scandal, and the video made by the 16yo revisiting the Clark experiment with black children and black and white dolls. I could hear the two women exchanging comments over how beautiful so-and-so was.

They left the room before I finished on the left side. The rest of the exhibit was devoted to photographs and portraits, offering a peek into personal lives and also a welcome contrast to the slickness of the advertisements.

The back wall and right corner included photographs of professionals and college graduates, including Alpha Phi Alpha and employees of some company. What also struck me about these photos was how light-skinned most people in these photographs were, and how “good” their hair looked, with soft waves instead of tight curls or “nappy” hair. Almost everyone looked “light, bright, damn near white” (how do I know this phrase?). The photos comprising the rest of the exhibit also spoke of money and power. Who had money in the 1920s and 30s to be posing for photos? The signs explained how African Americans took advantage of emerging technology to pose for portraits and to counteract public racist imagery.

I recognized James Van Der Zee’s name among the portrait photographers, but had not heard of James Latimer Allen or Doris Ullman, who was part of the “Pictorial Photographers of America.” I hastily scribbled their names in my notebook to look up later. An article on a doctoral student looking for Allen’s pictures describes his clientele as “black elite.” <http://www.yale.edu/opa/v27.n18/story6.html> The doctoral student says,

"These are the photographs of choice of a core group of black elite. Allen gave them a mirror on which to project themselves." A google search on Ullman shows that she photographed Gullahs, farmers, people in Appalachia.

As I looked at these portraits, a well-dressed young man came in, looked around briefly, and left. I finished looking at the exhibit. The last case of portraits were set in carrying cases, which made them look even more expensive.

Just outside the young man was speaking with the security guard. I think he is from Nigeria, and she is from a French-speaking West African country. She asked him where he was born, and he replied that he had been in the US for many years now. Again I did not interrupt.

I headed to the gift shop, where the two middle-aged women whom I had encountered before (with no eye contact) were exclaiming over the beauty of various products in the store. They each clutched products including a box of cards and some individual cards. The woman behind the counter brought out more cards, presumably handmade. One of the women exclaimed at its beauty and asked who did them. The clerk replied "a young lady." One of the women then said how expensive it was (\$4.99). The clerk said that the first batch had sold out so they ordered more.

The shop carried books, figurines, jewelry, boxed and single cards, postcards, and knickknacks. I was amused to see a postcard of Cornel West among those featuring W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, the Apollo Theater, and so on. I did not see anything related to the current exhibit. One book featured photographs of individuals and places in Harlem, but I did not buy it. I left with the women continuing to coo over the beauty of the products in the shop.

On my way out I saw that a man had replaced the West African security guard.

One of the flyers I picked up announces an exhibit "to help commemorate the Grand Opening of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's renovated facilities."

[Some issues for me: the woman who was in the "wrong building" was not welcomed and encouraged to come in; the question of "May I help you?" seemed to serve as gatekeeper and warning.

The choice of images. No Black Pride images, not to mention Black Panther or Black Power. Very Talented Tenth. Reflected in clientele?]