

THEATRICAL "Untitled (Havana, 2000)."

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Performance art is undergoing a revival in New York. Marina Abramovic, a veteran performance artist, has a retrospective opening at the Museum of Modern Art in March, and Performa, an every-other-year performance art festival held in November, drew record crowds. Not to be left out, the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase has an exhibition that surveys the work of Tania Bruguera, a Chicago performance and installation artist who was born in Cuba in 1968.



"Untitled (Kassel, 2002)," which briefly blinds spectators with klieg lights.

Ms. Bruguera makes the kind of work that art curators and critics like — it is conceptual in orientation, theatrical in presentation and has a smattering of sociopolitical relevance. It is little wonder that she is something of an art world darling and a stalwart on the biennale circuit. Her curriculum vitae at the back of the catalog for the Neuberger exhibition runs nine pages, revealing her participation in almost 100 shows.

In the face of such hype, it is easy to be distrustful, even a little cynical. But as the present exhibition demonstrates, Ms. Bruguera has the goods. On display are re-creations of a dozen of her better-known installations shown around the world over the last 15 years. There are also daily performances (with hired actors) throughout the exhibition's run.

The installations and performance sets fill the two huge back galleries at the museum — an ample, even overly large space given the limited number of artworks. However, Helaine Posner, the curator, has done an excellent job of presenting the art, especially the six installations that make up the core of the show. They are arranged in such a way that viewers are obliged to move from one to the other in a kind of flowing sequence. Together, they make a deeply powerful impression.

Viewers enter the exhibition through “Poetic Justice” (2002-3), a long, narrow tunnel-like installation in which the walls are covered with used tea bags. The tea is so pungent that you can smell the installation long before you see it. Small video screens displaying snippets of footage from old foreign newsreels are inserted into the walls at intervals and serve as a kind of foil for the earthiness and immediacy of the tea bags.

History is reduced here to an immaterial spectacle. But beyond that, it is difficult to make sense of “Poetic Justice,” for the explanatory text in the museum brochure that was produced to accompany the exhibition is riddled with art world jargon, and there is almost no discussion of this work in the exhibition catalog — a surprising omission for a teaching museum.

Better explanations accompany the other works, which tend to be more straightforward, anyway. They are, however, not for the timid. “Untitled (Havana, 2000)” consists of a dark room filled with milled sugar cane husks.

Visitors are invited to traipse through the dark toward a distant light, which turns out to be a tiny television displaying silent, looped footage of speeches by Fidel Castro. It is a political allegory, made more poignant by the inclusion of four naked male performers making empty, repetitive gestures toward their leader. You cannot see them unless you stay long enough to let your eyes adjust to the darkness. But you can hear them as you try to make your way to or from the television screen.

Other installations also incorporate performance art. “Untitled (Kassel, 2002)” consists of a darkened room in which performers walk on metal scaffolding above the audience, systematically loading and reloading guns. Every now and then powerful klieg lights switch on, momentarily blinding the audience. It is designed to make the audience feel vulnerable, like political prisoners, and afraid.

From there, visitors make their way through “Untitled (Palestine, 2010),” an empty white room with tiny text scrawled around the walls calling for the United Nations to unite Israel and Palestine into a single nation for world refugees. It is the most proscriptive of the six installations and, frankly, a little hectoring. Political art is interesting and informative insofar as it creates room for viewers to think about an issue, not push the opinions of the artist.

The second gallery is given over to various sets and materials used for the performances. The performance I saw was “Studio Study” (1996), in which a naked woman is bound with wide metal straps covering a good portion of her body; raw cotton oozes from the restraints as she balances on a pedestal for 45 minutes each day — a feat of endurance that recalls the work of pioneering performance artists like Ms. Abramovic and the late Ana Mendieta.

“Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary,” through April 11, Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. Information: neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100.