

Semiprecious

Public Art Fund at Metro Tech Center

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The Public Art Fund exhibit *Semiprecious* opened in late September 2004, in Brooklyn's bustling MetroTech Center—the largest urban university-corporate park in the U.S. and a recurring site for Public Art Fund projects. It will remain on view through August, 2005. Curated by Miki Garcia, Executive Director of the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum and a University of Texas alumna, *Semiprecious* includes one work apiece by artists Carolyn Castaño, Jennifer Cohen, Luis Gispert, Kirsten Hassenfeld and Marc Swanson.

MetroTech "Commons" is a large outdoor square with adjacent spaces almost entirely enclosed by drab skyscrapers. The area is crisscrossed with walkways and natural plots and already occupied by permanent public art works—by Tom Otterness, Paul Sisko and others—which operate like traditional public art. That is to say these works are big, obvious and unmistakable. Otterness and Sisko fight the *ennui* of this confining and unimaginative space in different ways—the former's whimsical arrangement of bronze figures uses humor; the latter's steel, fire-engine red *Balanced Cylinders* tries to compete, ton for ton, with the much taller surrounding buildings.

Contrastingly, the works in the temporary *Semiprecious* are small-scale, and unobtrusive—even missable. They are hidden in plain sight through a variety of disguises. I caught *Semiprecious* in the dead of winter when snow was piled up around the works, burying some and transforming others. From exposure, the polished bronze of Jennifer Cohen's *Diamond* (2004) had dulled to a dark patina. The six-foot-long sculpture suggests a cobra with a flared hood and roughly patterned body configured into a diamond shape. Placed on the ground near a hedge, only the snake's reared head and a portion of the body rose above the snow. This semi-concealment added to the work's alluring danger fantasy, but only if one happened to notice the work in the first place, which might be challenging in any season given its out-of-the-way placement.

Kirsten Hassenfeld's *Obelisk* (2004) is placed about a hundred feet away, in the center of an area circumscribed by pathways. Hassenfeld is a quick-rising artist known for sublimely crafted, often illuminated, vellum and paper sculptures that resemble agglomerations of faceted jewels (featured in *Greater New York 2005* currently at P.S.1). Here, the artist has fashioned a quaint, nineteenth-century-style garden decoration—an



Kirsten Hassenfeld, *Obelisk*, 2004
Plexiglas, mixed media
84 x 24 x 24 inches



Luis Gispert, *Laid Back In the Cut*, 2004
Bronze
37 x 21 x 30 inches

obelisk on a pedestal. Constructed out of white Plexiglas and standing approximately six feet tall, the obelisk portion is cut through with arches, decorative filigree and faces in silhouette, giving the material a lacey delicacy. Positioned on the pedestal, under the obelisk, is an oversized Plexiglas "gemstone." Protected by chained stanchions in a muddy winter plot, *Obelisk* looked cheap and anachronistic—not to mention dirty—and virtually disappeared within the modern, snow-covered surroundings.

Nearby, Luis Gispert's *Laid Back in the Cut* (2004) was also significantly obscured by snow.



Marc Swanson, *Fits and Starts*, 2004
Crystal, fiberglass, steel, glass eyes, adhesive
21 1/2 x 61 1/2 x 47 inches

Replacing a bench in a long row of park benches, this chrome-plated bronze work faithfully represents three old-style boom-box stereos arranged to form a functional bench (albeit an uncomfortable one with many knobs). Nostalgia and servility bring this dynamic ghetto icon to heel—it doesn't help that the work's shiny chrome plate has turned a dull, sickly color. Marc Swanson's sparkling, rhinestone-encrusted sculpture *Fits and Starts* (2004) fares much better. Depicting a life-size deer in mid-leap, the elegant sculpture is located in a large planter box in the middle of a busy pedestrian thoroughfare, contrasting mockingly with the frenetic, ungraceful movements of passersby.

Just inside the lobby of an adjacent building, Carolyn Castaño's *Nightbird (A Memory of Things Lost and Found Again)*, (2004), is so thoroughly steeped in nostalgia that it envelops everything around it with the same sad pall. A life-size peacock of indeterminate (but decidedly crafty) construction, the blue-black metallic-painted sculpture has a flat, costume-jewelry-studded tail and stands on thin legs on a floor-bound white plinth encircled by protective stanchions. In the otherwise empty lobby, *Nightbird* has a 1970s retro vibe, which bleeds out into the stylistically porous architectural setting.

And that's what *Semiprecious* seems to be all about. Eschewing the futile task of competing with MetroTech Center, the exhibit's slight insinuating presence is a subtle and somewhat subversive commentary on its surroundings. Whether *precious* (as in quaintly fussy) or *semi* (as in undervalued and half-noticed), these works assert a kind of passive-aggressive resistance to the full-throttle mission of urban renewal that so thoroughly stamps this particular public venue.