

L. Mequitta Ahuja, *Generator*, 2010; 84 x 80 inches; courtesy the artist and the Studio Museum in Harlem

R. Lauren Kelley, *Upside (video still)*, 2010; video transfer to DVD, color, sound; 3 minutes, 30 seconds; courtesy the artist and the Studio Museum in Harlem

NEW YORK

Usable Pasts

The Studio Museum in Harlem

Given that the Studio Museum in Harlem acknowledges the working lives of artists in its very name, it is satisfying to encounter the diverse, hands-on practices of the museum's latest Artists-in-Residence: Mequitta Ahuja, Lauren Kelley and Valerie Piraino. This year's AIR exhibition, *Usable Pasts*, offers a rich variety of art and ideas, with each artist displaying material and conceptual finesse in works produced during her residency. While the museum's mission strictly focuses on artists of African descent, these three women demonstrate how wide-ranging that demographic can be.

Identity, one among many facets of a "usable past," is complex material for art. The gifted Mequitta Ahuja, whose parents hail from Cincinnati and New Delhi, deploys her own image as a "surface" for ideas about painting, while extending her personal identity into wider cultural landscapes. Ahuja has often depicted her abundant black hair as an expanding, protean force that engulfs the pictorial spaces of multi-panel works. In frontal portraits, she also carefully depicts her amblyopia (known more commonly, and cruelly, as "lazy eye" syndrome). This use of the image of her own body as a screen for projection boldly engages viewers, asking us to reinforce or defy a host of prejudices about the nature and meaning of *vision*, as well as additional stereotypes of race and gender. Whether a calculated choice or merely an embrace of what is naturally hers, these (self-) conscious manipulations of the portrait effectively translate the personal into an active field for conversations on myriad other topics.

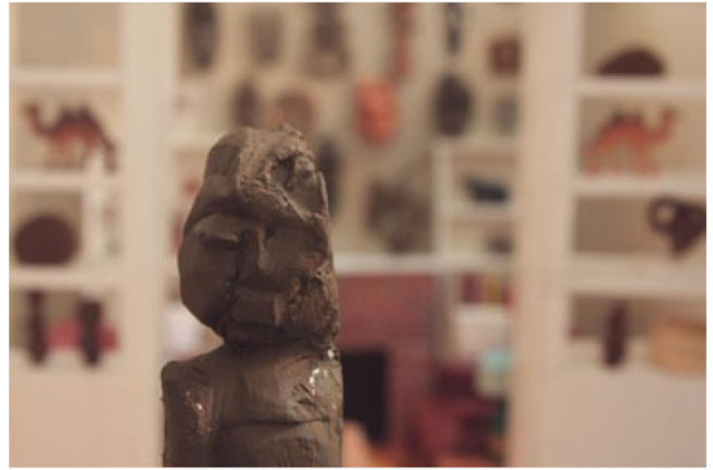
Perhaps even more interesting than Ahuja the social commentator is Ahuja the bold painter. The large, oil-on-canvas works *Regeneration* and *Half Moon* share a visual vocabulary of long, crescent-shaped brushstrokes that segment the picture surface into areas of cross-hatching and small,

triangular forms. Though the initial impression is of moody blacks and dark blues, underpainting of bright red, ochre, white and green come through in prismatic facets and flashes. From a few steps back, the whole of these canvases suggests an impenetrable network, thicket or, conversely, a partially captured, rotating sphere extending beyond the confines of the canvas and burning with an interior source.

Forge and *Generator* continue the thicket/sphere imagery, but here the central elements are archetypal figures surrounded and interpenetrated by expressive marks—prismatic facets, ripples, small pools of bright color, wave forms and scallops in Ahuja's robust brushwork. In *Generator*, the floating, robed figure with outstretched arms evokes a benevolent mother/goddess (and resembles Ahuja). In *Forge*, the figure—unclothed and also resembling Ahuja—is vaguely male-identified or androgynous: caught as if by surprise, it appears to be in the process of transition, stepping from one zone of mark-making into another.

Whereas Ahuja's mode is the mythopoeic, Texan artist Lauren Kelley works in miniature with a regard that is cool, tight and incisive. Her scripted videos are small-frame narrative vignettes that capture the essence of a character, relationship or cultural context. To maintain this level of intense control, Kelley works with voice-over and stop-motion animation using Barbie-style dolls that she dresses up and positions in hand-built sets. In *Prototypical Oppression/Obsession*, "big hair" airline attendants break in a new, black team member, with scenes played out in an airplane and hotel poolside. There are tensions, misunderstandings and meltdowns, which may or may not involve racism.

In the similarly ambiguous *Upside*, set in a suburban home and



L. Valerie Piraino, *With Pen in Hand*, 2010; found frames, slide projectors, slides, tables; 84 x 84 x 108 inches; courtesy the artist and the Studio Museum in Harlem

R. Lauren Kelley, *Lindy Trail*, 2010; chromogenic lightjet print; 24 x 36 inches; edition of 6; courtesy the artist and the Studio Museum in Harlem

poolside barbecue, the child narrator may or may not drown. Most ambiguous is *Wild Seed's* Alain Robbe-Grillet-style paean (in a French voice-over) to nature, set in an ornamental park that is either inundated or melts before our eyes. Clearly, this ambiguity is essential to the tone and content of Kelley's work. It allows for unusual soundscapes and wildly inventive material manipulations that make these videos such a thrill to watch: in one, the face of a nursing baby is a dynamic plasticine blob that merges with the breast of its mother; in another, pool ripples are made from plastic sheets and bubble wrap that jump and crinkle to the sound of splashing water. This DIY design style and Kelley's fast-paced editing have a seemingly offhand quality that is as appealing as it is technically deft.

Additionally, Kelley contributed three sculptures, one reminiscent of African tribal art and two flamboyantly abstract, each constructed from foam, pleather or other craft materials and all equally clumsy, kitschy and faux. The works in this suite are titled *Lindy Circle*, *Lindy Lane*, *Lindy Drive* and are accompanied by C-print photographs of modish home-interior sets decorated with similar artworks. The rough sculptures contrast seductively with Kelley's elegant manipulation of focal length to emphasize desired elements. As with the videos, the ambiguity of these works reveals the artist's desire to control the mechanics of visual and narrative disclosure on her own terms—like the materials, we are putty in her hands. (Note: before moving to New York, Ahuja and Kelley were Core Program fellows at the Glassell School of Art of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.)

Rwandan-born Valerie Piraino is perhaps the quietest, most inward-gazing of the three artists, even as her installations using slide projectors, family photographs, picture frames and wooden tables have the biggest

physical presence in the show. In terms of a "usable past," Piraino makes hushed but cogent statements about memory as an elusive quantity. In *With Pen in Hand* and *The Pregnant Moment (The house stripped bare)*, picture frames are displayed as either empty or provisionally filled by intermittent, overlapping, even sideways images flashed from projectors. In her work, the "frame"—be it physical, conceptual or an internalized psychological state—is a container fraught with problematic conventions.

With her *Simone* series, Piraino suggests that language is also a frame and equally problematic. Here, porcelain lozenge shapes inscribed with shorthand are neatly framed with matte board. Hung together like a family portrait wall, these works [e.g., *Simone (Her life's telling)*, *Simone (Deny/Discern)*, *Simone (He sat in silence)*] are cryptic, perhaps indecipherable, but clearly redolent with intense feeling. In an interview, Piraino speaks well for her own practice and perhaps all three residents: "It's really unusual for an artist to produce inside the walls of a museum, especially for such an extended length of time. For me that means I'm afforded the opportunity to create an intuitive space in my own studio..."

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