

The art of listening to art

ArtPace in search of art's pace

BY JOHN EWING

Eager to discuss contemporary art, a talkative crowd filled the Hudson (Show)Room at ArtPace last month for a forum with resident artists Mona Hatoum, Laura Aguilar, and Regina Vater. The lively energy began to drain from the room, however, with the first question: "What kind of cultural framework does your work have?" Vater recoiled from the microphone, stymied by its booming formality. Aguilar's short answer, "the culture of fear," brought confusion and ridicule. Preoccupied, Hatoum asked for the question to be repeated when her time came to respond.

Such is the case with artist panel discussions. Far removed from the act of making art, a public discussion is a moment of reckoning for both artist and audience. The artist is asked to explain, justify, and illuminate the processes behind her work; the audience is asked to bear witness. Moderated by art critic and filmmaker Laura Cottingham, last month's public dialogue seemed to bring ArtPace and its audience to a crossroads.

"I'm more interested in what these exhibits are than the artists ever are, and frequently they don't like to talk about it," said an exasperated Cottingham. Her comments were a clear critique of the evening's awkward discussion, which found the artists bemused, speechless, or caught in rote explanations. Performances aside, what the talk accurately conveyed was the difficult relationship these and other contemporary artists have with the larger community. In their residencies at ArtPace, Hatoum, Aguilar, and Vater have created work that challenges social norms and practices; each exhibit is imbued with the kind of personal insight that can get lost in polite conversation or mishandled by theoretical art-speak. So, how do these acts of conscience and bravery find a home in public discourse?

Mona Hatoum's strategy is to keep her art simple, an instinctive response perhaps to the extreme conflicts in her personal life. Born and raised in Beirut, Hatoum was visiting London in 1975 when civil war broke out in her homeland. Unable to return to her family, she made a new life for herself in London and found a new language in contemporary art. Her work has consistently dealt with the problems of building personal identity within socially constructed (and often violently controlled) spaces. Keenly suited to the grids and boxes of minimalism, Hatoum's art suggests the psychological effects of containment by focusing on the container. At ArtPace, she has constructed a human-scaled birdcage. It reflects her fascination with traps and cages, "anything to contain creatures in an environment where everything is provided but their freedom," says the artist.

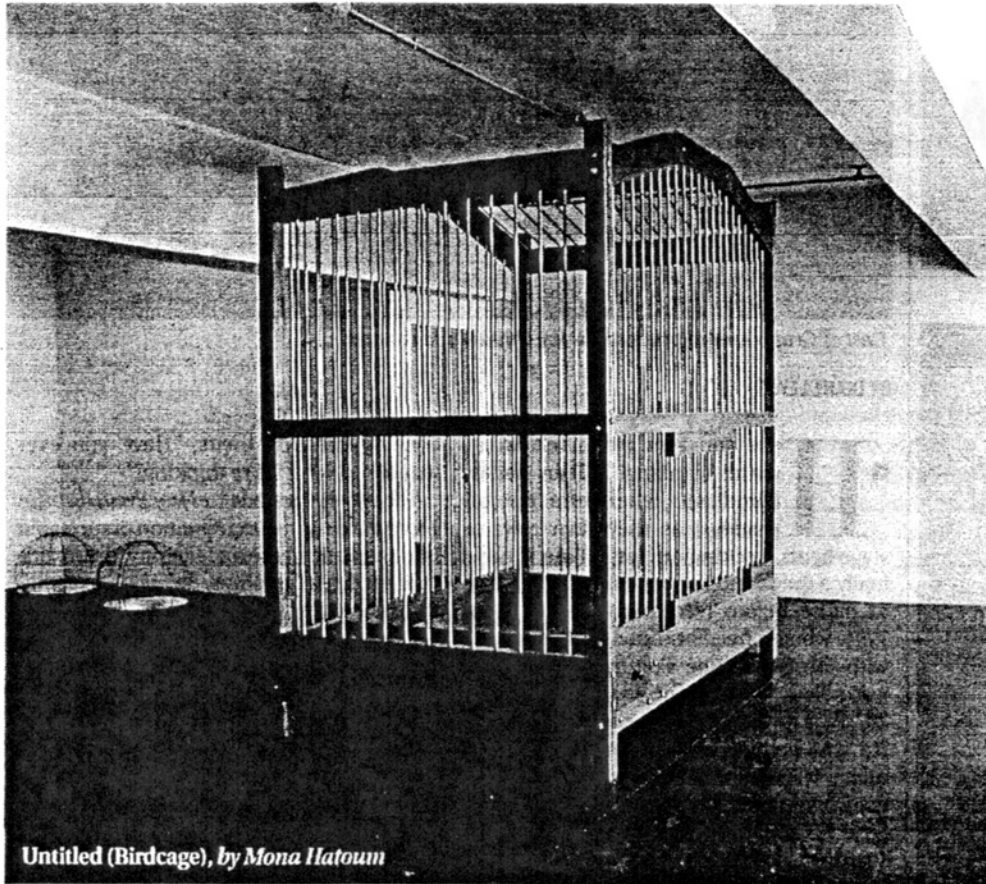
California photographer Laura Aguilar describes
See ArtPace, page 47

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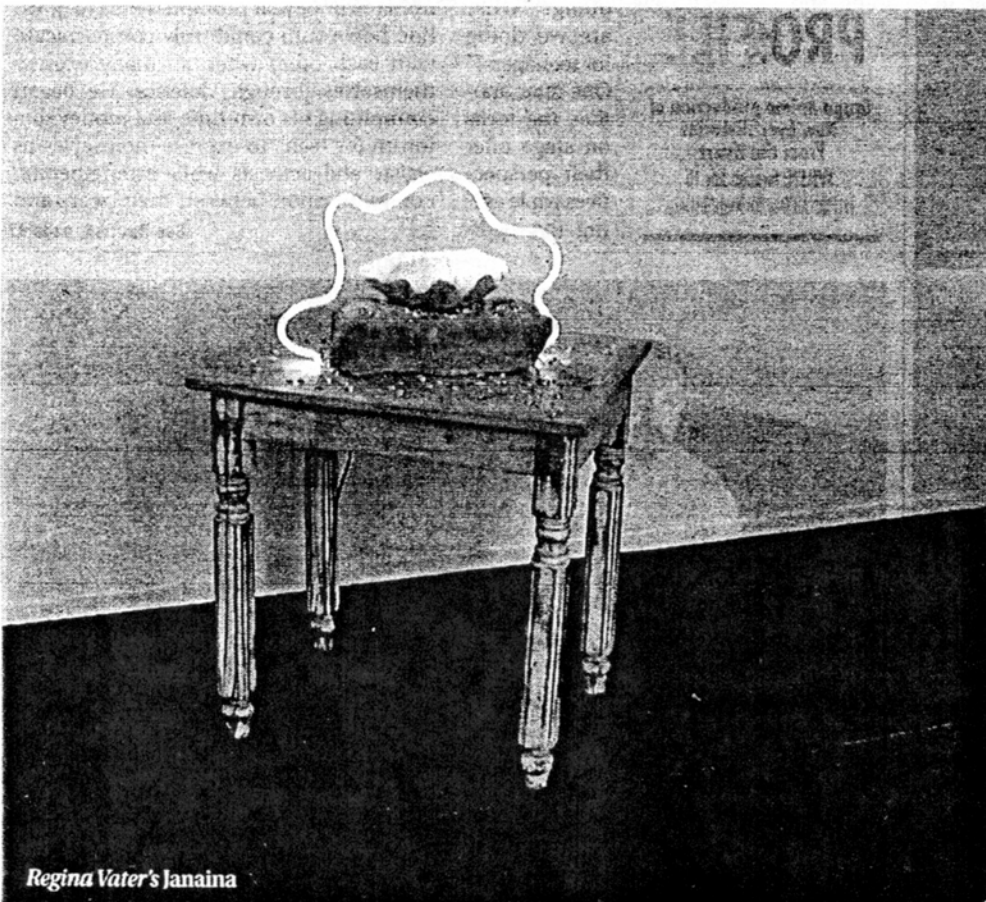
"New Works 99.2"

WHEN: through July 18

INFO: Exhibits Ongoing listings,
page 37



Untitled (Birdcage), by Mona Hatoum



Regina Vater's Janaina

ART'S SPACE

ArtPace

From page 17

her work as "finding a safe place to exist." Hard as that is for an artist, Aguilar's personal struggle as a large person further complicates her relationship to a body-obsessed culture. Not surprisingly, her art is a transformation of that struggle. Photographing herself nude in the Mojave Desert and various South Texas locations, Aguilar creates extraordinary new contexts for perceiving the female body. In black and white, the forms and lines of Aguilar's body find a natural harmony with the shapes, lines, and contrasts of the landscape. Additional images with a second nude female are posed to echo the settings' expansive rocks and trees. The photographs make an appeal to the aesthetic logic of composition: the balance of forms, spaces, and contrasts. Aguilar exchanges one culturally conditioned standard of beauty for another. In so doing, she gains a measure of control over both. "There are moments in your life when you are very much in touch with grace," says Aguilar. In the tradition of Emerson and Whitman, Aguilar locates human grace within the larger framework of nature.

Likewise, Regina Vater's multi-media installations use nature and its metaphors to reintroduce viewers to what she calls "fragments of a forgotten knowledge." "We don't listen to the planet, but it is teaching us all



Stillness, by Laura Aguilar

the time," says Vater. "I'm not against technology, but we need to be alchemists with it, not dominated by it like zombies." Inspired by the multi-

cultural heritage of her Brazilian childhood, Vater's art depicts parallels between the folk mythologies of Africa, Native America, and Europe. With simple materials such as popcorn, honey, and hair, Vater makes totem offerings that reference the deities and saints of Brazil's cultural ancestors. This isn't idol worship, however. The artist sees these figures and related mythologies as the tools of a nature-based wisdom, an antidote to high-technology. One installation refers to Artemis, the Greek goddess of dreams, the moon, and transformations. A video image of a full moon is reflected in a small pool of water below, but viewers can only see the reflection by stepping into the darkened space and standing over the pool. In this and other installations, Vater utilizes poetry texts and the sense experience of materials as means to a metaphysical education.

"Every cultural gesture is implicated in traditions that existed prior to it, regardless of how unconscious they may appear," said Cottingham, attempting to spur a conversation about the wide range of references embedded in the art. The opportunity was there, the artists and public were present, but, ultimately, the conversations were already taking place in the galleries, in the art itself. ■