

## ***ART REVIEW; Mirrors and Minimalism, Scented With Lilies***

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By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 30, 2004

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The Brazilian-born New York sculptor Valeska Soares produces the kind of installation that the eight finalists for the World Trade Center made famous: more or less Minimalist design with sound, light, water and plant life added, and with didactic references clearly conveyed by words or symbols. It is viewer-friendly: reasonable, accessible, theatrically entertaining and nonalienating.

One project included in the exhibition of Ms. Soares's work at the Bronx Museum of Art was in fact produced for a public site. Originally shown outdoors at Metrotech Center in Brooklyn, it consists of copper collars designed to encircle the trunks of trees, each engraved with a book title that has the word garden in it. (In the museum, the rings encircle tall white poles.) The project is supposed to convey multiple meanings and to expand the sense of the romance and history of gardens, but it is easy to imagine the copper rings engraved with the names of victims and attached to trees in a memorial garden.

Similarly, it is easy to imagine her mural-scale grid of mirrors, each etched with a book title containing the word mirror, converted to a memorial with mirrors bearing the names of lost loved ones. (The metaphorical resonance of the mirror would even be enhanced: the victim becomes us.)

The point is not that Ms. Soares should or should not be producing memorials, but that she works with formal and conceptual templates that are readily adaptable to any number of public themes. These formulas are guaranteed to engage interested viewers through pleasant formal experiences and layered but not too difficult iconography. The downside is a professional eagerness to please, which leads to blandness and a tendency

to think things out so thoroughly that there is not much left for the viewer to do.

These problems are evident in the main installation at the Bronx Museum. Laid out on the hardwood floor of the main gallery, "Vanishing Point" presents a mandalalike arrangement of 15 low-sided stainless steel vats. With curved and straight sides, the shapes of the vats collectively outline the footprint of a four-sided, formal European-style garden. Partially filling each container is green perfumed liquid, which imparts a flowery scent through the gallery.

Thus you have a neat interplay between the industrial present and the romantic, sweet-smelling past. With its sleek variations on Minimalist design and mildly didactic intellectualism, this work's destiny would be best fulfilled if it were embedded in the marmoreal fabric of some corporate or government plaza.

An element of surrealism -- mildly surprising juxtapositions of forms, materials, spaces and vistas -- is a feature of much public art, and it is important in Ms. Soares's work, too.

The show's most theatrically compelling work, "Detour," a room in which two walls are completely mirrored, is like a walk-in Magritte painting. The mirrored walls are slightly skewed so that the infinitely receding reflections of the room and the viewer appear to curve away into the distance. It is exhilarating, but then, mirror rooms usually are.

What is deflating is the audio component of "Detour." Speakers broadcast the voices of people who sound like college students; they describe a story by Italo Calvino about a mysteriously elusive woman and the men who pursue her. It reduces the piece to something more cleverly academic than deeply imaginative.

Ms. Soares's smaller works, conceived, one supposes, from more private impulses, are more surreal and playfully seductive. "Cold Feet," for example, is a thick, stuffed red-velvet snake with a simple aluminum boot attached at either end. It coils around a white column attached to a balcony in the upper level of the museum lobby, comically dumb yet mysteriously poetic.

There is also a giant dreamlike eyedropper with a glass tube that splits in the middle; it periodically lets fall a drop of perfume. You wish there were more such unpredictably fanciful works.

Best of all is "Fainting Couch," a low, rectangular bench of perforated stainless steel with a dainty pillow at one end. Secreted inside are Stargazer lilies, which accounts for the floral scent in the otherwise empty and sterile small room.

Here there is a richly condensed brew of associations: hard and soft, cold and warm, industrial and natural, masculine and feminine: all heated up by a mood of Sadean eroticism. It is the shady private side of Ms. Soares -- not her polished public facade -- that we want to know more about.

"Valeska Soares: Follies" is at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania, (718) 681-6000, through Feb. 22