Art in Review

"Raimundos, Severinos and Franciscos," a 1998 piece by the duo of artists Dias & Riedweg, enlisted 30 blue-collar Brazilian men, who each had one of three common last names.

By THE NEW YORK TIMES
Published: July 9, 2009

DIAS & RIEDWEG

Blog

ArtsBeat

The latest on the arts, coverage of live events, critical reviews, multimedia extravaganzas and much more. Join the discussion.

More Arts News

... and It Becomes Something Else

Americas Society

680 Park Avenue, at 68th Street

Through Aug. 1

Working as a team since 1993, the Brazilian artist Maurício Dias and the Swiss artist Walter Riedweg helped to shape some of the defining features of art in a self-consciously globalist era. One was the idea of the artist as a universal citizen with no fixed national allegiance. Another was the concept of art as public intervention, often political, always ephemeral. A third was a belief in the efficacy of collaboration, among artists themselves and between artists and audiences, which for Mr. Dias and Mr. Riedweg included groups of people with no connection to the art world.

All three elements play out in the Americas Society show, which gives a sampling of work from the past decade. The earliest piece, "Raimundos, Severinos and Franciscos," from 1998, is a charmer. In researching a project for that year's São Paulo Biennial, the artists found that many of the city's janitors and doormen shared one of three names and a common history: the men came from Brazil's poverty-stricken Northeast, and once they had landed city jobs, they tended to disappear into its fabric, becoming anonymous and as interchangeable as their names.
For the biennial the artists brought these invisible citizens center stage, literally. They invited 30 to build a small, free-standing model of the kind of cramped quarters they occupied where they worked. They then asked the men to enter the set one at a time and perform some everyday action — making coffee, fixing a meal, taking a nap — as if they were alone, even when the space became crowded.

The result, seen on video, is a kind of ballet of ordinary beauties, as ingenious as a Marx Brothers routine, as poised as Balanchine, in which each performer shines, a virtuoso.

For the video “David and Gustav,” the artists interview two of their contemporary heroes, the Conceptual artist David Medalla and the artist-activist Gustav Metzger. They are eloquent in completely different ways about their own countercultural histories, which were based on the interchange of art and life.

Another historical lodestar, Marcel Duchamp, is remembered in a video installation that tracks versions of his suitcase piece “Boîte-en-Valise” being passed from hand to hand in the streets of Rio de Janeiro. For an installation made in 2000 — only half of it is in the show — the artists spent time at the Mexican-American border, interviewing immigration officers, specifically those in charge of training guard dogs. A video contrasting the tender relationship between animals and keepers and the hostile purpose that relationship serves is uncomfortably moving.

Dias & Riedweg have been so active internationally for so long that it’s hard to believe that this is their first New York show, but so it is. Organized by Gabriela Rangel, director of visual arts at the Americas Society, it catches the balance of gravity and wit in their work and suggests that the aesthetic of art-into-life that has been so important a source for art in the past 15 years is far from exhausted. As money shrinks and digital communication expands, it could well be — again — the next big thing. HOLLAND COTTER

PAUL JENKINS

Space, Color and Light

D. Wigmore Fine Art

730 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street,

Through Sept. 25

Paul Jenkins’s career began in the 1950s, in the wake of the Abstract Expressionists, was spurred on by Color Field Painting and has been going ever since. The artist, now 85, is widely known, if not always critically admired, for flowing, billowing veils of color that dazzle with their formal acrobatics and luminous jewel tones. But his work isn’t seen in New York so often. This exuberant show offers a rare opportunity for total immersion.

Working with his signature ivory knives, Mr. Jenkins makes colors leap, overlap and splinter, pitting them against whiplash lines and stark white backgrounds that also add luminosity. His extravaganzas have always been too gorgeous for their own good. They are more a popular idea of abstract art than the real thing, which is why they made sense in the 1978 movie “An Unmarried Woman” as the work of the painter played by Alan Bates.

The paintings at Wigmore, from the 1960s and ’70s, show the artist at the height of his powers. They abound with highly abstracted intimations of nature — wind, water, clouds, rocks, changing light and plant and flower forms. The relatively small “Phenomena Matsumi Chant” (1962) announces an affinity with Georgia O’Keeffe that makes perfect sense, once you think about it.

But the paintings are also, equally, nothing more than the sum of their flamboyant facts. The standout in this regard is “Phenomena Shooting the Sun” from 1978. Dominated by orange and grape tones and an astounding transparency that enables you to savor every pour of color, it builds on Morris Louis’s work but takes many more liberties.

And there are several other canvases of audacity of color and gesture that — like them or not — can stop you in your tracks. Let me recommend “Phenomenon Oracle Arch” (1969) and “Phenomenon Wanderland Express” (1976). ROBERTA SMITH