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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

THE HOUSE PARTY SPIRIT IN ALL ITS GLORY

Exhibits That Show the Influence of Dance,
Music and Movement

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Photographs of men in drag, erotic murals in the bathroom, and glittery painted stars hanging from the ceiling are all part of *The B Sides*, a new, boldly unconventional show at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark. It looks at visual art inspired by 1980s and early '90s post-disco dance music, especially the pared-down genre known as house music.



The show gathers 32 artists and artist collectives with the emphasis on paintings and documentary photography of people partying. But there is also sculpture and installation art, for house music concerts, clubs and parties, which began in Chicago, Detroit and New York in the '80s before spreading to Europe, often involved elaborate setlike environments.

Several artists selected for the exhibition by Edwin Ramoran, the curator, are recording artists or worked as party promoters or set designers for clubs. Among them is Carlo Quispe, a stage designer and comic book artist who was given the task of decorating the structural columns in the gallery. Influenced by graffiti art and party culture, his column designs depict writhing, dancing figures, cartoon characters, tribal motifs and text. Mr. Quispe also did the restroom murals (involving sex and drugs).



DESIGNING

Above. *Lincoln Motel Birdhouse* (2006) by John Parris. Left, *Javier Ninja Performance* (2007) photograph by Ryan Joseph.

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An interest in the body, dance and movement is a common thread among the artworks in this show. Take, for example, the videos by Rashaad Newsome or Uraline Septembre Hager of a dancer performing poses from Afro-Brazilian martial arts, one of several influences on house music and dance; others include hip-hop, traditional African dance and 1960s funk music and dance moves.

The rise of the D.J. in the late 1970s, during the disco era, led to the emergence of '80s dance music styles, including house. D.J.s feature in several works here, including a color photograph by Tony Graves of Joaquin Claussell, known as Joe, a widely admired D.J. on the house music circuit. Ivan Monforte's diaristic video *Throw Your Hands Up in the Air* (2004–7) also includes various shots of well-known D.J.s, often performing at clubs and parties.

One of the show's most arresting exhibits, for pure wall power, is Jayson Keeling's black and white photographic portrait, a diptych, of the house music choreographer and dancer Willi Ninja. It is a powerful portrait, showing Mr. Ninja, who died in 2006, staring out searchingly at the viewer. Mr. Ninja was a central

figure in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* about the world of drag balls in Harlem.

The strong connection between house music and the gay club scene is referred to in many works, ranging from Ryan Joseph's 2007 photographs documenting New York's subculture of transvestite dance balls and beauty pageants, to Howie Keck's painted portraits of well-known gay performers from the music and dance scene. Mr. Keck's portrait of the singer Kevin Aviance, in fluorescent metallic oils, shows his subject surrounded by tropical flowers.

The show also includes works relating to the house music scene in Newark. Especially memorable is a series of documentary photographs by Vincent Bryant of the performers at the famed Club Zanzibar at the Lincoln Motel. Among those shown in the photographs are Grace Jones, La Toya Jackson, Patti LaBelle and Hippie Torrales, one of the more famous house D.J.s who worked here in the 1980s.

While Club Zanzibar no longer exists, it is immortalized in John Parris's *Lincoln Motel Birdhouse* (2006), a scale-model birdhouse imitating the motel's brick facade, made of wood, metal, asphalt and paint.

I liked this work a lot, as much for its eccentricity as for its intricate construction. For me, the idea of a birdhouse also evokes the original spirit of a club where like-minded people congregated.

The power of music in bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and cultures crops up here and there throughout this show. It is most noticeable, however, in the photographs of Tony Graves, a Newark-based photojournalist who documents the performers and audience at the annual Lincoln Park Music Festival in Newark. House music is an important part of the festival.

But beyond the obvious historical and sociological significance of this work, a lot of it deserves our attention for another reason: It is good art. That it is often fun and funky at the same time is an added benefit.

The B Sides, Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad Street, Newark, through March 7. Information: (973) 622-1600 or aljira.org.
