

House party environment captured in new exhibit

by Dan Bischoff

Just as psychedelia had its look and disco had its look, so did house party music, and through March, Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, is hosting a show just for that glittery, befeathered, identities-in-a-blender subculture.

Called *The B Sides*, the exhibition features work by 28 artists and collectives, and it's strong on photography and video, as you might expect. But it also features a remarkable amount of painting, sculpture, and elements of installation art, since most house parties of the early '80's to mid-'90s naturally evolved into sprawling environments.

Take, for example, Weehawken artist Howie Keck's big *Disco Stars* (2005), made of Mylar on a foam core with fluorescent enamel, or Carlo Quispe's black and white painted gallery columns, decorated with black Smurfs and other floating symbols.



Howie Keck's *Kunte Kuntty*, an image of singer Kevin Aviance, is also on display in Newark

There appears to be a fine line between creating an artist's environment and decorating your gallery to convey a sense of what the house party scene was like — after all, the scenery is only a small part of what you look at when you're dancing.

"It's too bad that people rarely get to really look at a lot of the art work that goes into these things," says Aljira curator Edwin Ramoran, who organized *The B Sides* and took part in the Bronx Museum's *One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art* exhibit in 2001.

Ramoran is standing before Keck's portrait of *Kunte Kuntty*, a painting

on canvas of singer Kevin Aviance done in fluorescent metallic oil enamel, showing him looking like Carmen Miranda and surrounded by stamen-heavy lilies.

"I mean, just look at this painting — it's really quite sophisticated, though you might not notice that in the uncertain light at an event."

The same goes for Soigné Deluxe's glitter-and-acrylics paintings of heavily made-up men, or Jayson Keeling's *Untitled (Portrait of Prince Rogers Nelson)*, 2008, done in glitter and debris on canvas, or April Choitz's mixed media *Donkey Kong* (2004) on fabric.

continued on other side

Maybe the best summations of house party elan are in documentary photographer Muema Lombe and artist Lorie Caval's collaborative photo/paintings, in which Caval takes snapshots by Lombe and either paints over the backgrounds or scratches very simplified contours into the photo surface. The incised marks make their own conga lines all across the image, like a minimalist graph.

"The term comes from the Warehouse in Chicago, where it started," Ramoran says, "but Newark has always had its own places for house music. It's derived from soul and dance R&B, of course. But what I noticed was that a lot of artists frequented these dance parties because the spirit is so congregational — they mean to bring people of diverse cultural backgrounds together, which artists like to do, too."

Newark's ultimate funk house was the Lincoln Motel, which once housed the famed Club Zanzibar and was razed a little more than a year ago. But it's back here, in the form of John Parris' *Lincoln Motel Birdhouse*, which reproduces the old brick-arched facade at startling scale. And, besides Lombe and Caval's manipulated photos, there are scads of images of Newark in this show, like the pictures taken by Pradeep Dalal, an Indian-born artist with a very good eye for excitement.



April Choitz's mixed media *Donkey Kong* is one of the works in *The B Sides* at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art

Not to mention very Newark visual arts evocations of house party themes. Like sculptor Jerry Gant's *I'll House You — You're in My Hunt Now*, a vintage phonograph turntable on which Gant has mounted a series of new soft sculptures that spin like a record. Delirious.

The B Sides

Where: Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad St., Newark. **When:** Through March 7. Noon–6 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 11 a.m.–4 p.m. Saturdays. **How much:** \$3; \$2 seniors and students; free to children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Call (973) 622-1600 or visit aljira.org.

Dan Bischoff may be reached at dbischoff@starledger.com