

### Exploring the Effects of Disco's Beat

by Benjamin Genocchio

Riding the considerable wake of a well-received hip-hop and art exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2002, "Do You Think I'm Disco," a zany new exhibition at the Longwood Art Gallery @ Hostos, surveys the influence of disco music and dance culture on contemporary art. Not too surprisingly, much of the work is about sex, drugs and music.

Still, this is probably one of Longwood's best exhibitions, which is saying a lot given that the gallery, now in its third year at this location, has a fine record for intellectually adventurous and aesthetically slick fare. The curator, Edwin Ramoran, has also made an effort to include not only established artists but also other, lesser-known players.

A warning to under-age patrons in the entry, however, is probably in order, for this show contains at least the suggestion of porn. It hits you pretty much at the outset, with Curtis B. Carman's sculpture made of tar, a Barbie doll, a disco ball, a vibrator and mirrors; I'll let you work it out. And then there are Boris Torres's raunchy paintings, right behind the reception area.

Primarily, though, the focus is on disco and dance music, and the way that artists have used or responded to it in their work. Christian Marclay, an established video and sound artist, points to the androgynous fashion of the era by splicing together pictures of male and female singers on old, cheesy disco-era record covers. The composites are clownishly campy.

Other artists fret about the proprieties of disco music and copious drug use. "The Day Disco Died" (2005), a painting by Ray Felix, shows a collapsed, sequined disco diva surrounded by collaged syringes, colored pills, bags of smoke and other life crutches. She has overdosed on the dance floor, I guess, a victim of the era's manifold excesses.



*"Phat Ali Shah" (2005), mixed media on wood, by Negar Ahkami.*

Disco has always had an infectious spirit of fun and freedom about it. You get some of that fun feeling here, as much from the works as the way they are exhibited. Mr. Ramoran, trashing normal exhibition practices, has crammed artwork in, displaying pieces on every conceivable surface -- including the floor, which is covered with a Brent Birnbaum disco dance-floor piece depicting a map of the South Bronx.

The disco era -- the late 1960's through the 1970's, basically -- was a time of social and political upheaval, and disco, according to Mr. Ramoran, writing in a room brochure, was an agent for change. To make this point, he has selected artworks that emphasize disco's

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links with youth club culture, racial politics and sexual-liberation movements.

Various artists make an obvious connection between gay culture and disco music. There is Mr. Carman's offering, of course, but also Matt Wolf's seedy 2004 video "I Feel Love" (the title a reference to a 1977 Donna Summer hit, and a popular gay anthem), along with Carrie Moyer's trippy, disco ball-like abstract painting titled "Inflamer."

Dorothy Dean, the only documented African-American member of Andy Warhol's inner circle, is the subject of a series of photographs by Jayson Keeling and Kalup Linzy. According to obituary information published online, Ms. Dean earned a Master's degree in fine arts from Harvard and held down editorial jobs with prestigious magazines including *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*. But she drank and smoked too much, and eventually died of cancer, at 54. The artists, curiously, have depicted her as a man dressed as a woman. Partly, this

seems a sly reference to her homosexuality, and partly a nod to her unwillingness to be bound by conventional sexual stereotypes: she quit magazine work to become a bouncer at Max's Kansas City, the legendary 1960's bar that became a hangout for Warhol's entourage, as well as other artists, actors and writers.

There is sweeter stuff, too, like Megan Whitmarsh's embroidered thread paintings of lithe, dancing stick figures on polished black cotton. Here, yetis (as in the *Abominable Snowman*) dance with cute girls, and groups of boys and multicolored creatures jive together in harmony. But this pretty, innocuous-looking work somehow also gets into the thick of things, suggesting a utopian vision of disco as a populist art form. Disco saves the world. ■

*"Do You Think I'm Disco," Longwood Art Gallery @ Hostos, 450 Grand Concourse, at 149th Street, the Bronx, through March 18. Information: (718) 518-6728 or [longwoodarts.org](http://longwoodarts.org).*



"The Day Disco Died" (2005), mixed media and acrylic on canvas, by Ray Felix.