

“ The testimony of the six artists brought together by Margo Crutchfield for MOCA’s extraordinary exhibition....”

review

By Douglas Max Utter

## Reality Show

Material Witness @ MOCA C



“Witness” is a word that evokes a great theme of modern culture. In legal and religious contexts it affirms the crucial importance of the individual observer.

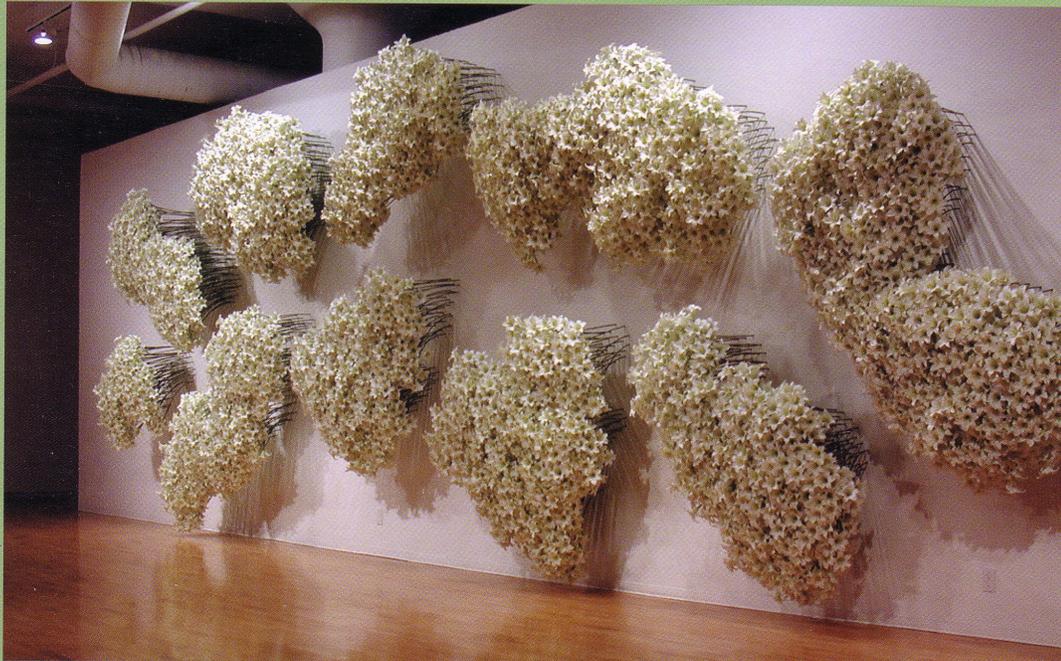
The testimony of the six artists brought together by curator Margo Crutchfield for MOCA’s extraordinary exhibit, “Material Witness,” is hardly a matter of courtroom drama, yet drama, and truth, are everywhere evident. Metaphor and seductive texture join sound and scent to conjure a world of dreams and hopes and terrible defeats. Taken as a whole, the works seem muted, almost elegiac in their treatment of man’s inhumanity to man, posing the big, life-and-death questions that haunt us all. There is sorrow and anger here, but in the measured outrage of conscience.

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s mysterious and poetic video, *Memorial Project, Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex – For the Courageous, the*

*Curious, and the Cowards (2001)*, is in some ways the most impressive work on view. Filmed underwater at the bottom of the Mekong River, the video remembers the plight of the post-Vietnam War “boat people,” by using dreamlike sequences that convey much about the human spirit and the desperation of forced exile. The visual storyline depicts a race between several cyclos — bicycle taxis. Still a common sight in Vietnam’s cities, these modern rickshaws may soon be a thing of the past as the Communist regime moves to outlaw them. They serve as an emblem of past American and European exploitation, but they are also the last refuge of certain individual entrepreneurs. In the video several young men pull and push these conveyances along the bottom

of the river; often they let go of the handlebars, face for a gulp of air, then submerge their faces and resume their task. Sometimes the camera focuses on escaping air bubbles (a metaphor for freedom, to waking?) and the way they curl, down to slow dances of light. Which of these inseparable elements is death?

In *Cemetery – vertical garden* by Maria Fernanda Cardoso a wall of the dead: victims of colonial and social history. Cardoso’s work consists of 6000 artificial lilacs on the wall, a little like the



Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba  
MEMORIAL PROJECT, NHA TRANG, VIETNAM;  
TOWARD THE COMPLEX -- FOR THE COURAGEOUS,  
THE CURIOUS, AND THE COWARDS (2001)  
Digital video projection  
Courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo

Maria Fernando Cardoso  
CEMETERY-VERTICAL GARDEN/CEMENTARIO-JARDIN  
(1992-2004)  
Artificial flowers and pencil on wall  
12 ft. high x 43 ft. long as installed at MOCA  
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego  
*Museum purchase with funds from Charles C. and  
Sue K. Edwards*

Johnny Coleman  
STATION TO STATION (2004)  
In memory and celebration of Ms. Florence McCoy:  
"ain't no quit in her..."  
Recovered wood, straw, oak and maple leaves,  
pigment, rusted tin, raw muslin, raw cotton felt,  
*5.1 surround sound*  
Site-specific installation, 3,000 square feet  
Courtesy of the artist



stones in a stream, or markings on an animal's hide. More typically Cardoso works with thousands of preserved salamanders, or butterflies even a flea circus of her own making. She often exploits the baroque complexity of natural forms, so her *Cemetery* is an exercise in extreme simplicity, as well as artificiality. Possibly it alludes as well to the sort of death that mass production spreads over the earth, or to the irony of fake flowers manufactured and purchased en masse for something as particular and human as grief.

Johnny Coleman's *Station to Station* is more about the living, or how those who are now a part of history once lived, and how their struggle continues into the present. Coleman lives and teaches in Oberlin, Ohio, which was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The artist has often used evocations of the home as a metaphor for personal history. Here Coleman's installation is like a time machine, delivering viewers to a few moments in the haunted years leading up to the Civil War.

Coleman's shed-sized construction is made of bales of hay and salvaged oak beams, topped with a tin roof. Visitors crunch through a layer of dry leaves and enter the structure through a thick felt blanket. They sit on another piece of felt, on a bench at the far side. There is a trap door in the floor with a handle, but it doesn't open. The air is thick with the warm scent of old straw. Then the sounds begin: a heartbeat, footsteps, splashing, a sudden cry and a terrible, questioning silence. As curator Crutchfield remarks in her eloquent catalogue essay, "*Station to Station* takes the viewer beyond the literal into a dream-like, almost subconscious dimen-

sion...the objective and subjective, past and present, dissolve."

The phrase *croque mort* means "undertaker" and translates literally as "bite death." Originally it referred to medieval morticians' vital-sign practice of toe biting. Photographer/conceptualist Douglas Gordon uses this grotesque thought to skew his otherwise apparently blithe color photographs. Known for his preoccupation with the shifts in meaning and perception caused by slowing things down, here Gordon brings his images to a full stop. Showing close-ups of a baby biting its own toes, and of its hands and

feet scrambled together, Gordon's insta (displayed low on blood red walls) is *Croque Mort* and suggests that the bound life and death are identical, reminding that this narrow terrain is what art is all

Laylah Ali has risen to prominence over a few years with a remarkable series of drawings. Her cartoonish, South Park-like figures have a classic Toys-R-Us quality that is also reminiscent of folk art and the illustrative friezes of ancient civilizations. The nightmarish history Ali touches, however, is closer to the Spanish Inquisition or the sacred blood sports of the Maya. Her decapitated lollipop heads and decoratively arranged severed limbs are among the most disturbing in terms of Ali's narrative. It's hard to know whether to smile or recoil in horror from her work; the source of its unusual power.

Santiago Sierra's video *Hiring and arranging of 30 workers in relation to their skin color* is exactly that. Filmed in Vienna, the filmmaker appears to be a fairly relaxed and friendly, in stark contrast to the racist and potentially genocidal implications of such stratification. In general Sierra has sought to bring attention to the exploitation of cheap labor in Western countries, and the Vienna project seems more comparable to the brutality of many of his other pieces. Sierra has hired workers for an hourly pay to sit in boxes, pull huge concrete blocks, or be tattooed with a line across their back as they stand facing the wall. If there is anything lacking in "Material Witness," it's the strength and edginess that Sierra and Coleman in particular have shown in other work venues. Thought-provoking and beautiful, "Material Witness" is also very mild. Midwest audiences should be given a chance to prove they're as tough as any.

**MATERIAL WITNESS**  
MOCA Cleveland  
8501 Carnegie Avenue, Cleveland  
January 23 – April 25

Douglas Gordon  
**CROQUES MORTS**  
1 of 7 Framed Digital C-Prints  
53 x 37.5 inches  
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London

