



GALLERIES



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Funkaesthetics

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BY DAVID BALZER February 25, 2009 21:02

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Mar 23. Mon-Wed 11am-5pm;
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1-5pm.
Justina M Barnicke Gallery, 7 Hart
House. 416-978-8398.
www.jmbgallery.ca.

More contemporary art exhibits should be as fun and edifying as "Funkaesthetics." The exhibit is co-curated by Pan Wendt and artist Luis Jacob, whose practice seems to have to been building up to a project like this for quite some time. (Torontonians probably know Jacob best for his 2005 Toronto Sculpture Garden installation, which turned on a lyric from Parliament's "Flashlight.") At root, "Funkaesthetics" is really a feat of placement, of juxtaposition; pedants (if there is such a think as a funk pedant) might chafe at the pivotal inclusion of Leigh Bowery, for instance, who is typically read more within the context of Orland-like performance art or queer club culture; a converse protestation might be that the show elides disco. But the idea here is pluralism, and it is quite inarguably true that without the inter-genre propulsion of funk in the late '60s and early '70s, dance culture as we know it now simply wouldn't exist.

The four major artists of "Funkaesthetics" are Bowery, P-Funk, Sun Ra (pictured) and Adrian Piper, Piper being the least familiar of the bunch but in many respects the show's raison d'être. Her Funk Lessons, which she held all over the place between 1982 and 1984 (including at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, nifty documentation of which is presented in slide format), were cheeky happenings designed to teach those unfamiliar with or wary of the procedure (i.e., the dancing out) of funk how it went. A video documentary from 1983 illuminates Piper's in-tent: in it she discusses how funk is seen by resisters as "boring and monotonous" (cf. contemporary criticisms of hip-hop), how it celebrates sex ("it's less a matter of sexism, more a matter of sexuality") and how white bands like the Talking Heads and The Clash filter it through melody ("[that's] funky ... not funk").

It's not only Piper who calls "Funkaesthetics" "Funkpedagogy." From Sun Ra's ancient-Egypt fetishism to illustrator Pedro Bell's amazingly detailed, hieroglyphic P-Funk covers, the idea of expansion (mental, temporal, physical) is paramount. As suggested by Torontonians Day Milman and Paige Gratland's "Free Dance Lessons," however, funk is concerned with learning through doing; like a good art show, it's never as hard as you think, and can take you places you've only dreamed of.

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