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ART IN REVIEW; 'None of the Above' -- 'Contemporary Work by Puerto Rican Artists'

By HOLLAND COTTER

Real Art Ways
56 Arbor Street, Hartford
Through Oct. 3

Definitions of identity and politics in identity politics have changed since the 1990's, growing subtler or softer, depending on your point of view. Several exhibitions have explored this shift as it applies to Latino art. The most recent is "None of the Above: Contemporary Work by Puerto Rican Artists" at Real Art Ways, a feisty and enterprising alternative space in Hartford.

The change in thinking is implicit in the show's title, which avoids mention of a unitary "Puerto Rican art" (or, for that matter, Latino art) and refers instead to 16 artists who identify themselves as being, in some sense, Puerto Rican. Not all of them were born on the island. And among those who were, several now live and work in the continental United States or Europe. Generally speaking, the diaspora phenomenon has become the basis for a new kind of identity politics. The art it produces is internationalist in style, embracing photography, video and installation, and tends to hold what might be called indigenous culture at a wry arm's length, in some cases bypassing it.

Manuel Acevedo, for example, who was born in New Jersey and lives in New York City, makes no direct reference to Puerto Rico itself. Instead, through hand-altered photographs, he fills an empty lot in an ethnically mixed Hartford neighborhood with architecturally scaled sculptures. In Javier Cambre's tabletop sculpture based on a building at the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan, European modernism seems to be his subject as much as a Caribbean setting. And fanciful architectural forms by Cari González-Casanova exist in a transcultural Space Age rather than in the real world.

Even specific references are made abstract. The Puerto Rican resort hotels in paintings by Enoc Pérez look as distanced and generic as Warhol soup cans. The landscapes and cityscapes in a video piece by Nayda Collazo-Llórens might have been shot almost anywhere. An abstract mural-size painting shimmering with glass beads by the artist called Dzine (Carlos Rolón) brings Japanese screens to mind, while Chemi Rosado Seijo neatly sends up abstraction's claims to transcendence by encasing Malevich's utopian geometric forms in decorative soft-sculpture frames.

Absurdity is the show's strong suit, and artists use it purposefully. Arnaldo Morales's huge, mechanized crossbow reads like a muscular joke on technological power. An installation by Charles Juhász-Alvarado, a star of this show as he has been of others, complicates history. He has created a wooden replica of a Wells Fargo van attacked by a Puerto Rican pro-independence group in West Hartford in 1983, but he has turned it into an ice cream truck, sweetening -- for better or worse -- what was a bitter political gesture.

In a similarly light-touch way, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla address an aspect of Puerto Rico's political self-image in their short film "Returning a Sound." It follows a young man's motorbike journey over the island of Vieques, until recently the site of a United States Navy base and vociferous protests over bombing exercises, which were ended last year. As if to celebrate the departure of the military, the motorbike's exhaust pipe has been fitted with a trumpet, which burbles away, like the voice of a town crier, throughout the ride.

Organized by Silvia Karman Cubiñá, Deborah Cullen and Steven Holmes, "None of the Above" travels to

Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in San Juan in January. But Real Art Ways, a space New Yorkers would do well to keep their eyes on, gets credit for presenting it first, and well.

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