

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Tougher Than the Rest

A South Orange Show Spotlights Works of Grit and Attitude

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

There are several independent organizers of in-your-face group exhibitions in New Jersey, perhaps the most prominent being Rupert Ravens, a 52-year-old curator from Newark. Best known for a rollicking show last year in a vacant Newark bank building, he has now stuffed the Pierro Gallery in South Orange with more than 100 works by 31 artists for "Singularity," an exhibition themed loosely around current world events.

Mr. Ravens has backed off — a little — from his usual grunge-and-grime aesthetic, but there is still plenty of grit and attitude. The show brims with tough-looking work, beginning with that of Rolando Politi, who makes sculptures from recycled cans and bottles — the one here is in the shape of a bouquet of flowers — which he gives away or exhibits on a chain-link fence outside a community garden on the Lower East Side in New York.

References to globalization include Grace Graupe Pillard's computer-generated photographs of groups of immigrants trudging past New York City monuments like Yankee Stadium and Washington Square. The artist-provocateur German Pitre is also represented, with photographs and paintings weighing in against the war in Iraq, capitalism and American imperialism. It is nice to see artists engaged with the news, but the effectiveness of these political statements is open to debate.

Pop-influenced material abounds. Among the better works of this sort is Brian Dettmer's skull made from melted cassette tapes of 1980s pop bands — Culture Club, the Go-Go's, and the like. (He has created a bunch of these skulls, each using tapes from a different era.) The piece reflects art fashion, for skulls are everywhere in contemporary art these days. Perhaps it's a throwback, too, to Andy Warhol, who popularized skulls in screen-prints during the 1960s. Or perhaps it has something to do with the

"Singularity in the Communal Tide: Culture and Identity in the Moment," Pierro Gallery of South Orange, 5 Mead Street, South Orange, through July 15. (973) 378-7754 or [www.pierrogallery.org](http://www.pierrogallery.org).



## SINGULAR SENSATIONS

Clockwise from right: Gae Savannah's miniature sculptures "Patisserie (Arabella)" (2004) and "Lei-Tsu" (2003); Clarina Bezzola's "Toothvest" (2003); and a still from Victor Alimpiev's video "Summer Lighting" (2004).



country's being at war.

Identity politics, that well-worn art trope, motivates a bunch of the works, from Willie Cole's screen-prints to sculptures by Fred Wilson, James Andrew Brown and Tom Nussbaum. An intriguing inclusion of a work of this ilk is an installation by the South African artist Nicholas Hobo that incorporates an African initiation blanket used in ceremonies, including the circumcision of young boys. The piece consists of a rolled up blan-

ket entwined with red cloth and thread draped over a table and chair. When the work is seen in person, the phallic symbolism is self-explanatory.

This exhibition's one indisputable work of quality is "Summer Lighting" (2004), a two-minute color video by the Russian artist Victor Alimpiev. Mr. Ravens saw the work at the 2006 Berlin Biennale and was determined to bring it to New Jersey. It is set in a schoolroom to the thunderous sound of schoolgirls rapping their knuckles on desks.

The sound gets louder and louder to a point where we are not sure if there is a thunderstorm or maybe a bombing raid in progress.

The show also gathers some impressively crafted artwork, from Gae Savannah's miniature shrines to shopping (made of accessories from beauty stores) to Nina Levy's life-size human figures (here a shirtless man and a playing child.) Installed on the left-hand side as you enter the gallery, they are so realistic that you momentarily believe there are other people in the gallery.

Only when you look closely do you realize that they are made of resin.

Mr. Ravens is the sort of curator who likes to push the space wherever he goes. He has done so again here, using every spare inch of wall and floor in the gallery, as well as the outside first-floor balcony, to display art. He also gives a wry nod to the toughness of the exhibits with a work on the building's façade: Thomas Broadbent's inflatable plastic lettering spelling the words "Don't Cry."