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ART; Inviting or Not, What Do Beds Mean?

By WILLIAM ZIMMER OCT. 4, 1998

IN the 17th century, Samuel Pepys could end his diary entries with, "And so to bed." In those days it meant recovery and respite from the day's business. But in the late 20th century, it isn't so easy. Concerns and anxieties follow a person to bed and can remain vivid. This is abundantly illustrated in "Embedded Metaphor," at the Zilkha Gallery, at Wesleyan University in Middletown.

The gallery's curator, Nina Felshin, has brought a raft of artistic beds into the capacious exhibition space making it seem at first like either a hospital ward or a hallucinatory furniture showroom.

Ms. Felshin originally created the show in 1996 for Independent Curators Inc., a New York organization that circulates exhibitions. It arrived in Wesleyan after five previous bookings from Nova Scotia to Florida.

Not every item is a bed per se. One of the first works encountered is a chaise longue created by Renee Green. It looks inviting in every way, and the cotton toile fabric covering it is based on an antique French pattern.

But if viewers look past the garlands of flowers on the fabric they will see discreet yet clear depictions of torture, rape and the unpleasant like that was experienced by slaves brought to the New World.

A second chaise-like object is "Coifed," looking something like a stuffed poodle. But it is covered in thick black Mongolian lambskin and sits on a duvet covered in red

silk. It was dreamed up by Lauren Lesko who says in catalogue commentary that she had an analyst's couch in mind, one on which the analysand could experience, "happy forgetting."

Rona Pondick's "Black Bed" has the informal look of a chaise, but its two long, narrow pillows covered in black satin, one on top of the other, resemble mating seals and the piece looks altogether wicked, a place for the Marquis de Sade to lay his head.

Some beds hunker close to the floor, and these are associated with impoverishment. The show contains several large photographs on the bed theme, and a group of Cibachrome prints by Perry Bard of makeshift bed-and-home combinations made mostly out of cardboard by indigent people camped on Manhattan sidewalks in the late 1980's. Curtis Mitchell's contribution is a large rectangular section of sidewalk grating the crevices of which are filled with dirt and crushed glass; it has an odd, mock bejeweled beauty.

Also strangely beautiful is Rirkrit Tiravanija's summoning up of the atmosphere of Southeast Asia in a paradoxical work called, "Untitled (Sleep/Winter)." A cotton-filled comforter is loosely curled on a straw mat covered in bright orange cloth; a bar of soap in a pearlescent pink wrapper is placed next to the bed.

The bed in Tom Swerver's Cibachrome print, "Sculpture for the Moment, Snug Harbor, New York, U.S.A.," is on legs, but it's only a skeletal frame. On the bedsprings is a wadded-up sheet out of which emanate many slender, long pliant rods that may be metaphors for an old man's unruly thoughts. It helps to know that Snug Harbor on Staten Island, now an art center, used to be a home for, as a plaque reads, "Worn out and decrepit sailors."

The bed created and photographed by Mr. Swerver is a variant on another of the show's sub-themes, beds with embellished sleeping surfaces, more exactly with projectiles in place of a mattress. These works make their point succinctly, and include "Gurney of Nails" by Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. An experienced yogi might find it inviting, but for most people it stands for the experience of being in a hospital. The stained mattress of Mel Chin's "Jilava Prison Bed," which refers to the

jailing of a Romanian priest during the early 1980's, is in the shape of a cross with five large steel spikes poking through the bottom.

Worlds apart from Mr. Chin's bed is the crib made by Donald Lipski, which is packed full of upright white candles. Mr. Lipski says in the catalogue that at the time he made this crib (1991) he and his wife were trying to conceive a child. At the end of his statement, written in 1996, he says that his son is now 4 years old. Babyhood and childhood might be expected to inspire artists to make small beds, and it does. Janet Biggs has elevated a crib on stilt-like legs, and on the floor, forming a ring around the bed, is a troop of identical stuffed horses. Ms. Biggs implies that this was what her old room looked like, that the horses protected her from "lurking danger."

Antonio Martorell's "Kamikaze" is the only piece in the show that viewers are allowed to physically experience. The work is more like a self-contained room with a foam rubber floor and covered with mosquito netting on which sit several large insects out of wire and sequins. Mr. Martorell, who was born in 1939, says that the piece evokes blackout warnings during World War II. Dale Kistemaker gets a room of his own for "His Bedroom." The best thing about it are sophomoric entries from his autograph book projected on top of the bed from the ceiling.

Both Ann Messner and Caryl Davis have made grown-ups' four-poster beds, but both have made them much shorter in length than normal. This shrinkage can startle on encountering one of the beds, but they are so close in concept that one wonders why both of them are in the exhibition.

Finally, beds can be a vehicle for social issues writ large. Catherine Saalfield and Zoe Leonard, for example, offer "Keep Your Laws Off My Body," which has imprinted sheets and pillowcases with legal statutes pertaining to women's rights.

"Embedded Metaphor" remains at the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University in Middletown, through Oct. 16.