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| WORLD | U.S. | N.Y. / REGION | BUSINESS | TECHNOLOGY | SCIENCE | HEALTH | SPORTS | OPINION |
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ART REVIEW; For Hopeful Artists, the Search to Be Just Themselves

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"ARTIST in the Marketplace," known as AIM, was founded in 1980 as an intensive finishing school for emerging artists. In addition to getting career-management advice, the artists in the program collaborate on an annual exhibition of their work. Its 26th installment is now on display at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which is home to the program.

The exhibition features the work of 36 artists from the 2005-6 program, much of it paintings, drawings and related works on paper. Photography is rather surprisingly sparse, as are video, sound and installation artworks. Does that mean emerging artists are returning to more traditional art?

The short answer is no, for while painting and drawing dominate AIM this year, the types of painting and drawing on display are so varied and experimental that it would be unwise to equate the medium with the message. Dizzy chaos rules, with most artists paying the proprieties of tradition little more than an air kiss of acknowledgment.

This year's crop of hopeful artists includes a handful born and raised in Islamic countries -- a fact that is not always apparent in viewing their work. The exception: super-strong paintings by Tazeen Ahmed, incorporating news images and memories of a childhood in Pakistan that tell stories about the social vulnerability of young girls. Some works depict scenes of violation.

Equally thoughtful are J. C. Lenochan's charcoal and watercolor paintings of found photographs of current events and personal snapshots, many of them tough images of emotion, terrorism, violence and exploitation. I see them as subtle reveries on human nature, or at least some of the worst aspects of it. And yet they equally confront and delight, given the ethereal elegance with which the imagery is conveyed.

Paintings by Steve McClure, Heidi Neilson, Christopher Patch, Kristen Schiele, Sarah Trigg, Theresa Bloise, David Antonio Cruz and several others impress but don't really excite. What is missing is personality, mostly, for if you are going to work with an established artistic medium, then you need to stamp some individuality onto it. You have to make it your own, so as to step out of the bland uniformity of so much other art.

Be more adventurous and ambitious, I guess is the point. It is not good enough to do a capable copy of the work of another artist, or even to be talented as a painter or an illustrator. You have to be original -- in other words, yourself.

A wonderful installation-sculpture by Diana Al-Hadid (born in Syria, living in New York City) disrupts the prevailing two-dimensional bias. Prominently placed in the middle of the main room, it looks like an outsize disintegrating phonograph or a melting marzipan flower of some sort. Frankly, I have no idea what it is. But it announces a young artist of unusual imagination and creativity. This is by far the most ambitious, thoughtful and original work of art here.

Beyond Ms. Al-Hadid, Alison Ward invites us to step into a peep-show booth to watch short films of go-go dancing predators chasing seminaked women through the woods. It is a spoof of horror movies, partly, but also a caricature of childhood fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks. Framed mock movie posters surround the viewing booth, announcing coming attractions. I can't wait to see them.

I am also curious to see where Wayne Hodge and Gautam Kansara go from here. They are among the exhibition's diminished ranks of video artists; each works with humor, and each is interested in questions of cultural difference. Their videos aren't funny or lovely, but quirky enough to keep you intrigued to the end. Each one is also modestly short -- viewed in about six minutes.

Other works have an elementary-school air about them, which is perhaps worrisome given that more than half of the artists are recent M.F.A. graduates. But generally the standard is pretty high, confirming the vitality of this much-cherished program.

"AIM 26," the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse (at 165th Street), through July 2. Information: (718) 681-6000 or bronxmuseum.org.