

Hegert, Natalie. "Some Full Circle on Randall's Island"
ARTslant.com (May 3, 2012)

ARTslant New York

Some Full Circle on Randall's Island: John Ahearn at Frieze Projects

by Natalie Hegert

Some people living in New York have great views, most don't. Where I lived in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the view from the front of the apartment overlooked an off-ramp from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Day and night trucks would rumble past, slamming into potholes and screeching on their brakes. The building would literally shake—a constant earthquake—with the only respite on Sunday mornings or during the occasional blizzard. If any windows were left open, within a few hours a layer of fine soot would settle on my desk, on the window sills, on the counter tops, on the coffee table—the black grimy airborne remnants of the countless rubber tires wearing away with each rotation on the BQE. Greenpoint is a sweet little neighborhood just a few blocks away, but where I lived it was miserable: loud, dirty, miserable.



Ahearn and Torres at Fashion Moda 1979

Many such expressways criss-cross the boroughs, all because of one man: Robert Moses, the urban planner and "master builder" of mid-twentieth-century New York. Along with his parkways, expressways, plazas, tunnels, and bridges, Moses created many of the parks New Yorkers enjoy today. Yet he also displaced over 250,000 people and demolished hundreds of buildings to make way for his projects: like the Cross-Bronx Expressway that cut right through the middle of the South Bronx, transforming it from a viable, working-class neighborhood into one of the worst slums in the United States. His biographer, Robert Caro, described Moses gazing at an enormous map of the city that hung on his office wall, as "a sculptor who wanted to sculpt not clay or stone but a whole metropolis." Moses never compromised his Corbusian vision for the city based on human cost; when asked whether he

found it difficult to build expressways through dense urban centers, he simply replied, "There are more people in the way—that's all."

In 1979, seven years after the Cross-Bronx Expressway was completed, at a time when the South Bronx was in the throes of destitution, John Ahearn presented an exhibition called South Bronx Hall of Fame at the young art center Fashion Moda. Ahearn is a sculptor; but unlike Robert Moses who cast aside people to sculpt his metropolis, Ahearn immortalizes those selfsame people in plaster busts and in life-size statues. Ahearn set up shop outside of Fashion Moda's Bronx storefront, which had been established by fellow Colab artist Stefan Eins a year earlier, and along with his collaborator Rigoberto Torres,



Buck and Earl, 1979

Alexander and Bonin

created plaster life-casts of neighborhood people, artists, friends, local children, as well as junkies from the methadone clinic across the street. These plaster busts were then painted, and mounted on the wall, high above eye level, as though the people, everyday people, were gazing down on you like a pantheon of demi-gods.



Alex. 2005

Unlike the work of Duane Hansen or George Segal, Ahearn and Torres's casts don't represent the anonymous "everyman" or hyper-real replicas of "real" Americans, where the model's individual personhood is obliterated once transformed into a sculpture. Rather, Ahearn and Torres' plaster busts are true portraits: the title of each sculpture bears the model's name, and each detail of the person's face, clothing and hair is faithfully reproduced and respectfully rendered. Ahearn makes a point of producing two editions of each bust—one for himself to be displayed as an artwork in a gallery or other public setting, and one to give away to the model to display in his or her home. Many families in the Bronx own an original Ahearn artwork, and to Ahearn, this concept of gift-giving and private display is integral to the artwork itself.

The plaster casts often appear sentimental, naive, and somewhat folksy, making the objects themselves hard to place in a contemporary arts context, something Ahearn readily admits: "I'm well aware of why art history hates saccharine, sweet things." What really lies at the heart of Ahearn's work, however, is its relational aspects, the collaboration—between him and the model, and with Torres, a South Bronx neighbor and artisan—and the concept of accessibility, exchange, and gift-giving. He says of his Bronx murals and plaster casts, "They're popular, in a simple storybook way, and that's good, that's a stronger statement, that's maybe more serious, because it's more collaborative—it draws on the deeper, idealistic life of the people."

As part of Frieze Projects, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres have been invited to reconstruct South Bronx Hall of Fame, showing both original casts from the 1979 exhibition as well as creating a new series of commissioned portraits on-site for the duration of the fair. The curator, Cecilia Alemani, announced it as "a tribute to the alternative spaces and galleries that were once vital for the artistic community and have now closed," such as Fashion Moda, which closed in 1993. Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival, a South Bronx collaborative of kids and teenagers led by artist Tim Rollins, were also involved with Fashion Moda, and are also featured at Frieze Projects. The context is of course, quite different than in the South Bronx in the 70s and 80s. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. will be creating a 40-foot painting in an idyllic park-like setting, while Ahearn will be life-casting art collectors at 3,000 bucks a pop.

But beyond that, the site of the fair itself is of great importance. For Robert Moses' headquarters were located on Randall's Island—it was from there that he masterminded the displacement of thousands of families, creating the vast, miserable slum that John Ahearn eventually made his home, and the subject of his life's work. These two men represent polar opposites: Moses, with his expressways, was accused of loving cars more than people, while Ahearn genuinely loves people, especially those who are dispossessed, downtrodden, and demonized. While Moses' impact on the face of New York is inescapable, built in the form of towering bridges and extensive expressways, Ahearn's is resolutely human-scale, and perhaps more subtle, more simple, but goes right to the heart.