

ART REVIEW

Hip-Hop As a Raw Hybrid

By ROBERTA SMITH

You can almost hear the eyebrows knitting and the nostrils flaring. The Brooklyn Museum of Art, the object of all kinds of opportunistic and misguided moralizing during its "Sensation" exhibition last year, has now mounted an exhibition titled "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhythms and Rage." The show, which was organized by Kevin Powell, a music critic and historian, for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, has been tweaked and expanded for Brooklyn with help from Kevin Stayton, chairman of the museum's decorative arts department.

Its mission is to survey the innovative and by now worldwide explosion of culture and commerce that is hip-hop — a phenomenon whose chief art forms are music, poetry and dance and one that has been condemned for lyrics containing harshly realistic depictions of inner-city life, references to sex and violence or displays of misogyny, homophobia and anti-Semitism.

But there's no need for worry. Despite its focus on one of the (sometimes) rougher sides of popular culture, this is a tame, diluted show. I have never seen a major museum exhibition that looks so nearly identical to the requisite gift shop at its end.

The show is checkablock with posters, album covers, T-shirts, sneakers, jackets and baseball caps; some of them are the stage gear of hip-hop stars, others are the products of hip-hop designers like P.U.B.U. (For Us By Us), or of hip-hop-influenced designers like Tommy Hilfger. Its memorabilia includes handwritten lyrics, sunglasses and glittery gold medallions, as well as the 1990 decision of a Florida court (later overturned) that some of 2 Live Crew's lyrics were obscene.

This array of material presents a reasonable, if highly simplified, outline of hip-hop history, from its emergence in the South Bronx of the 1970's to world domination. There are dozens of the modest Xeroxed handbills, some of them designed by the graffiti artist Phase2, that advertised hip-hop events in its underground years; a tony album cover from Sugar Hill, the small New Jersey record company that brought out "Rapper's Delight," the first national hip-hop hit; and scores of glossy magazine covers — *Vibe*, *Source*, *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's Bazaar* — featuring the faces of hip-hop stars.

Objects that transcended mere historical interest include two big, bold black-and-white posters designed for Public Enemy by Eric Haze of the Beastie Boys, the first white hip-hop group. In the "Roots" section, a contemporary copy of one of Cab Calloway's rakish suit suits — this one in bright yellow with matching hat — demonstrates that hip-hop's penchant for sartorial exaggeration is a long-standing tradition. Also striking is a long gold cloak, its shoulders studded with horns of silver glitter, worn by the D.J. Afrika Bambaataa in performance, and a varsity-type jacket in red, white and yellow leather belonging to Peppa of the female hip-hop duo Salt-n-Pepa: it is appliquéd with the classical masks of tragedy and comedy, but their traditional meaning is skewed with the words "Laugh Today, Cry Tomorrow."

The exhibition's overall effect is heavy with the personalities, products and relics of hip-hop, yet curiously untouched by its artistic vigor: the words, sounds and moving bodies that are the essence of hip-hop are nearly invisible here. Some of its problems could have been solved by including less more, rather than just a few snippets, of the innovative 80's music videos that disseminated the hip-hop sound and look worldwide. But that might have brought some of hip-hop's jarring lyrics into the museum.

Hip-hop is so full of raw, unfiltered life — and is also such a marketing force — that some people have trouble seeing it as art. But art it definitely is, the latest wave of innovative black music that began with the ragtime of Scott Joplin and the Delta blues of Robert Johnson. This fabulous, constantly mutating hybrid drew on rhythm-and-blues, disco, salsa, reggae and the ancient ritual of call and response — all brought together by D.J.'s who made a structurally new music by scratching, cutting and sampling existing records on double turntables.

Performing first in parks and at parties, hip-hop's founding D.J.'s — Grandmaster Flash, Mr. Bambaataa and Kool D.J. Herc — combined the percussive sounds of needle on vinyl (scratching) with precisely chosen, rapidly repeated breaks from other people's music (cutting and sampling). Among those who responded



Brooklyn Museum of Art

Subway-car door painted by Michael Tracy, in "Hip-Hop Nation."

first to these sounds were young dancers, many of them Latin, who developed the acrobatic intricacies of break-dancing. When the masters of ceremonies who introduced the D.J.'s (and sometimes the D.J.'s themselves) started talking in rhyme over the sounds emanating from the turntables, the insistent spoken word art generally known as rapping was born (although M.C.-ing is the preferred term among insiders).

Hip-hop has been called a folk art by some and postmodern by others. Even though it is not foremost a visual art, its possibilities as the subject of a show in an art museum (as opposed to a music or historical museum) are rich.

First of all, it inspired the exuberantly pictorial writing of graffiti art. The few examples added for the show's Brooklyn installation only make you wish for more. (They include a relief by Phase2, paintings by Lady Pink and Toxic, and a painted subway-car door by Tracy 146 that is currently the subject of a dispute between the artist, Michael Tracy, and the estate of the art dealer Sidney Janis, which donated it to the Brooklyn Museum last year.) Hip-hop had a direct influence on artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, who is represented here by a single, pathetic screenshot. It provided an inspiring cultural backdrop for the artists who worked in the South Bronx in the 1980's, including John Ahearn and Tim Rollins and K.O.S., whose work is absent here.

More generally, to look at hip-hop through the lens of contemporary art — or vice versa — can reveal an exhilarating array of connections. Hip-hop's emphasis on language, its often harsh realism and political slant (or, conversely, its blatant political incorrectness), its dense collaging of appropriated fragments and borrowed cultural references — all have correlatives in the work of

visual artists throughout the 1980's and 90's, from Sigmar Polke to Barbara Kruger to Kara Walker.

Hip-hop's inventive wordplay and often brilliant linguistic connotations have spawned new words and also, more importantly, a poetry revival among urban youth that has strong connections to performance art (as seen in the heavily attended poetry slam at New York sites like the Nuyorican Cafe, Bar 13 and Urbana). A broader visual manifestation is hip-hop's profound influence on the way people dress in general and on fashion in particular, from the sports arena to the runway.

You come into this show expecting some kind of dazzle and aggressiveness — a wall of garments all made in denim or camouflage, perhaps; examples of haute couture riffs on hip-hop style; or big blown-up texts that would fling hip-hop's in-your-face lyrics in your face. Keith Haring's graffiti portrait of Fred Brathwaite — a graffiti artist himself under the tag Fab Five Freddie — is a perfectly nice addition. But some of the music videos Mr. Brathwaite and others directed in the 1980's would not only have brought hip-hop sounds and moves into the museum, but they would also have merited consideration as video art.

This show feels like a cross between a mall and a museum; it simultaneously panders to its audience and isolates its subject from both its own vitality and its broader cultural context. All the Brooklyn Museum really needed to do in approaching the multimedia art form of hip-hop was act like what it is, a serious art museum. With all respect to the obvious efforts of Mr. Powell and Mr. Stayton, this would have required a much broader array of expertise and resources, beginning with the involvement of curators of contemporary art and fashion. Hip-hop is a big subject. It deserves the big treatment.

"Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhythms and Rage" is at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 200 Eastern Parkway, Prospect Park, (718) 638-5660, through Dec. 31.