

Art

Felipe Arturo, Nayia Frangouli, David Greg Harth, Vandana Jain, Matt Keegan, Kambui Olujimi, Lisi Rankin, Paul Wirhun,

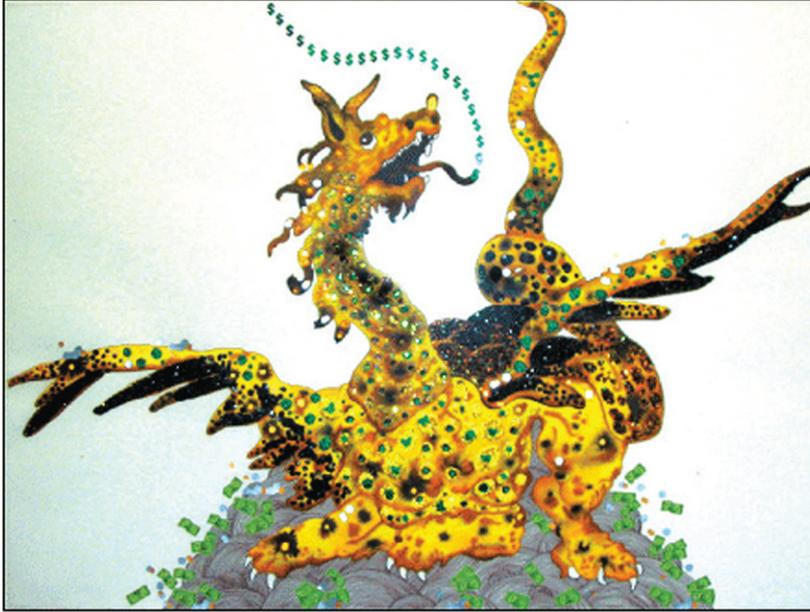
Joe Scanlan, Alejandra Villasmil

Ends Jan. 6

Apexart

291 Church St.

(212-431-5270; apexart.org)



Alejandra Villasmil, "Sign Language," 2006

An exhibition worth unwrapping

By Shane McAdams

On its surface, "Thanks: Returning the Favor" is a high-concept, seasonably appropriate exhibition at Apexart addressing notions of gift giving and philanthropy. But beneath its wrapping, the show inadvertently ventures into stickier territory about curatorial responsibility and basic definitions of art. One wonders if this is a project centered around the ten artists exhibited, or if the ten artists have been appropriated to form the basis for a broader conceptual art work. This rhetorical question becomes more difficult when you take into account that no curator is named in the exhibition.

The artists in the "Thanks" have been asked by art professionals to produce small original works that are to be wrapped and given as gifts to a select group of philanthropists. Viewers don't know if the 'gifts' will be accepted or not. Rather, the point seems to be whether the artists are legitimately returning favors out of benevolence or because they are beholden to a benefactor. According to literature for the exhibition, this uncertainty was meant to generate discussion. And the discussion that it does inspire (in the form of published letters written to Apex Art) becomes the most significant content in the show.

Though most of the art in the exhibition succeeds on its own terms, "Thanks" is an art show that functions primarily as a sociology experiment-cum-artwork in the tradition of Hans Haacke or Gordon Matta Clark. This places tremendous material contributions such as Lisi Rankin's "Wind Tunnel" and Vandana Jain's "Faberge" into supporting roles. Paul Wirhun's "Children's Globe," consisting of globes made of pigmented eggs, is no longer simply a whimsical and intriguing curiosity, but a visual prop in a larger experiment.

"Returning the Favor" raises profound questions not only about charity and commerce in the art world, but about the content of art. But because it calls itself "uncurated," it is basically a work of art without an artist to claim it. As is often the case these days, the loser seems to be the individual artists. Much like Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne's handling of this year's Whitney Biennial, we see a case here where, despite the significant contributions of the artists, their art ends up being recontextualized by the broader mission of the curators.