

By Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic
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Babs Reingold's "Hung Out in the Projects" at the Morean Arts Center is, for all its grittiness, a lyrical work of art. Not superficially pretty in any sense but beautiful in a deeper way.

I'm not sure that's Reingold's main purpose. The subject matter and message hit you in the face. The installation simulates a dirty, bereft area in a public housing project where laundry is hung on lines to dry, a microcosm of the despair and hopelessness that pervade such a place where generations of families have been born, lived and died.

Reingold herself lived in such a place in Cleveland for several years when her family unraveled financially and emotionally because of devastating illnesses.

She, as you can guess, overcame the stultifying inertia endemic to slums but never tried to leave it behind, finding themes and subjects that have informed much of her art over the years.

"Hung Out" is not really autobiographical. The dim area is a metaphor for any place where poverty festers, lit with bare bulbs on timers that suggest time's passage in a place that changes little for its inhabitants as the years tick past.

Yes, it's grim. And the details of the installation reinforce the mood. The ground is littered with critters that suggest feral cats and dogs, along with animal skins, and a washtub holds things resembling entrails that could have been catered by Hannibal Lecter. Windows with smashed glass are hung on the wall. A text component flashes words that form the installation's narrative: isolated, danger, violence, welfare, for example. An audio component by sound artist Lin Culbertson provides background street sounds, mostly ambient but sometimes pierced by sirens, footsteps and screams.

At this point you're probably thinking you don't want to see the work.

I hope you do. If this were only a social and political statement, it wouldn't qualify as art and I would not be writing about it. I find this work worth contemplating because it's formally well done and interesting. A large group of drawings, studies for this exhibition and past ones, hang nearby to provide more opportunity to examine the process of making the art. That formality allows us to distance ourselves a bit, even intellectualize the experience, so we're not mired in the misery of the subject.

For example, there is no specific reference to individuals. Everything represents a collective condition. Most of the "clothes" hanging on the line are exaggerated and distorted, all made from the same neutral fabric marked with stains made from tea and rust to look like decades of grime. Some are stuffed to suggest volume. You might not want to know the stuffing is human hair. In that case, forget I told you.

The thing is, you don't have to get too close to any of this. You're encouraged to climb a scaffold (wear flat soles), which gives you a high perch from which you look down into the scene. It provides a needed detachment even as you study the strange details.

You descend the scaffolding's stairs on the other side of the gallery where a wall hanging outfitted with pockets and pieces of more "clothes" is stained to look like the strata of a geological dig. That's more perspective for you: This place has been around a long time.

You proceed into the adjacent gallery, which has a group exhibition of unrelated photographs except for a dirty old window set into part of a wall. It gives you yet another perspective. You're looking in — reluctant voyeur that you are — except that you're also inside looking out. The photographs of that other show are reflected in the dusty glass, so you can be assured that you are definitely in a better place.

Walking back through the "Hung Out" gallery, which you must do to exit it, you see at floor level all the clothes on the line, telescoping and compressing. They're made of silk organza, an ironically luxurious fabric now ruined, stand-ins for all the ruined souls that might inhabit them. Life is precious, they imply, until it isn't. Only one garment has color, a dress the color of dried blood, its sleeves and hem sewn shut. Case closed.

Reingold clearly wants to transmit her outrage at the ghettoization and abandonment of a large population of Americans. It's a big message. She means to use an iron fist to convey it. I see the velvet glove encasing it. That's where the art comes in.

We meet in the middle of it all.

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[LARA CERRI | Times]

Babs Reingold lived in a housing project in Cleveland as a girl, though "Hung Out" is a metaphor for any destitute place.



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Clothes on the line are made of silk organza, a luxurious fabric now ruined, representing the ruined souls that might inhabit them. The sleeves and hem of the red dress are sewn shut.