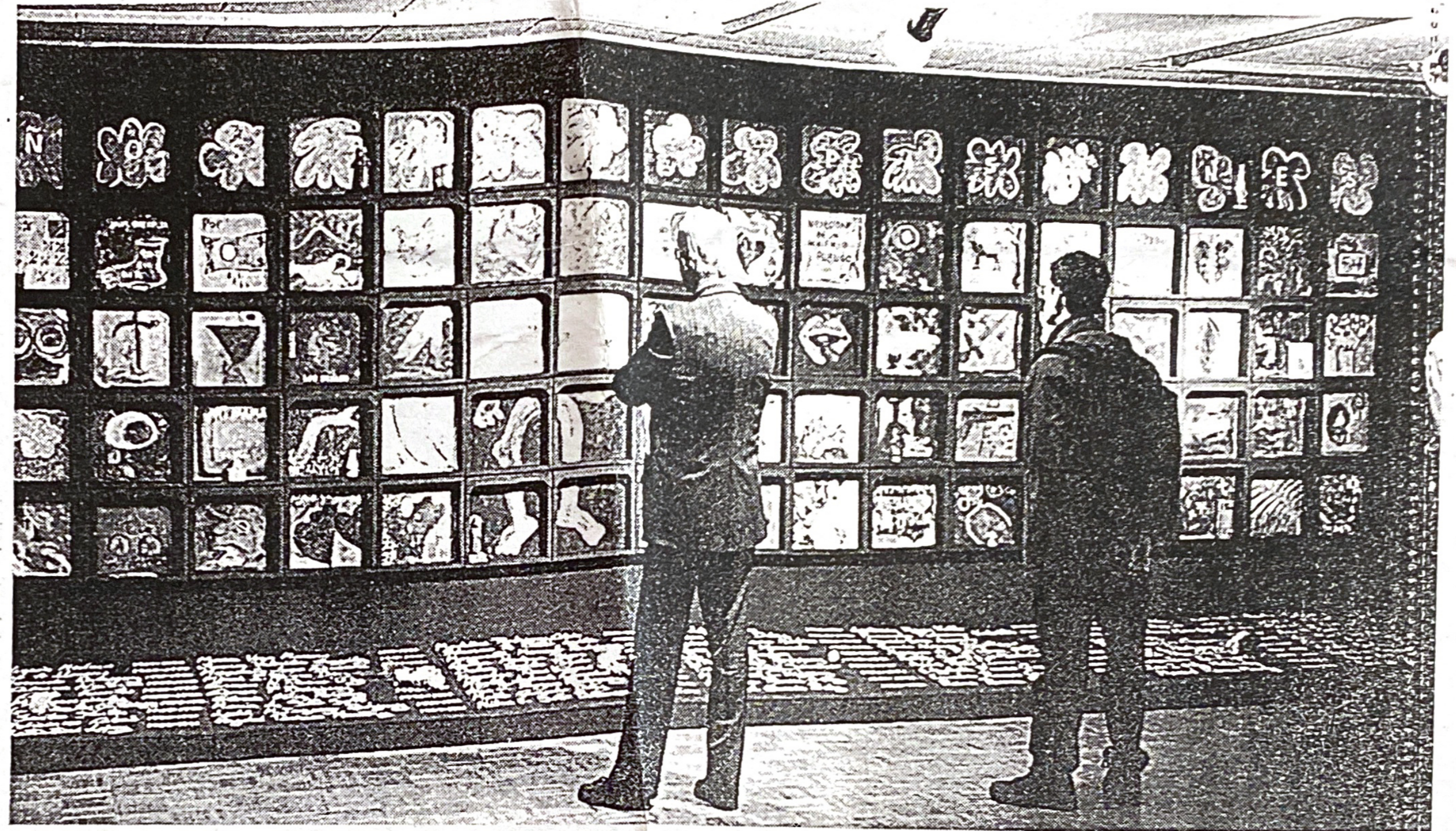
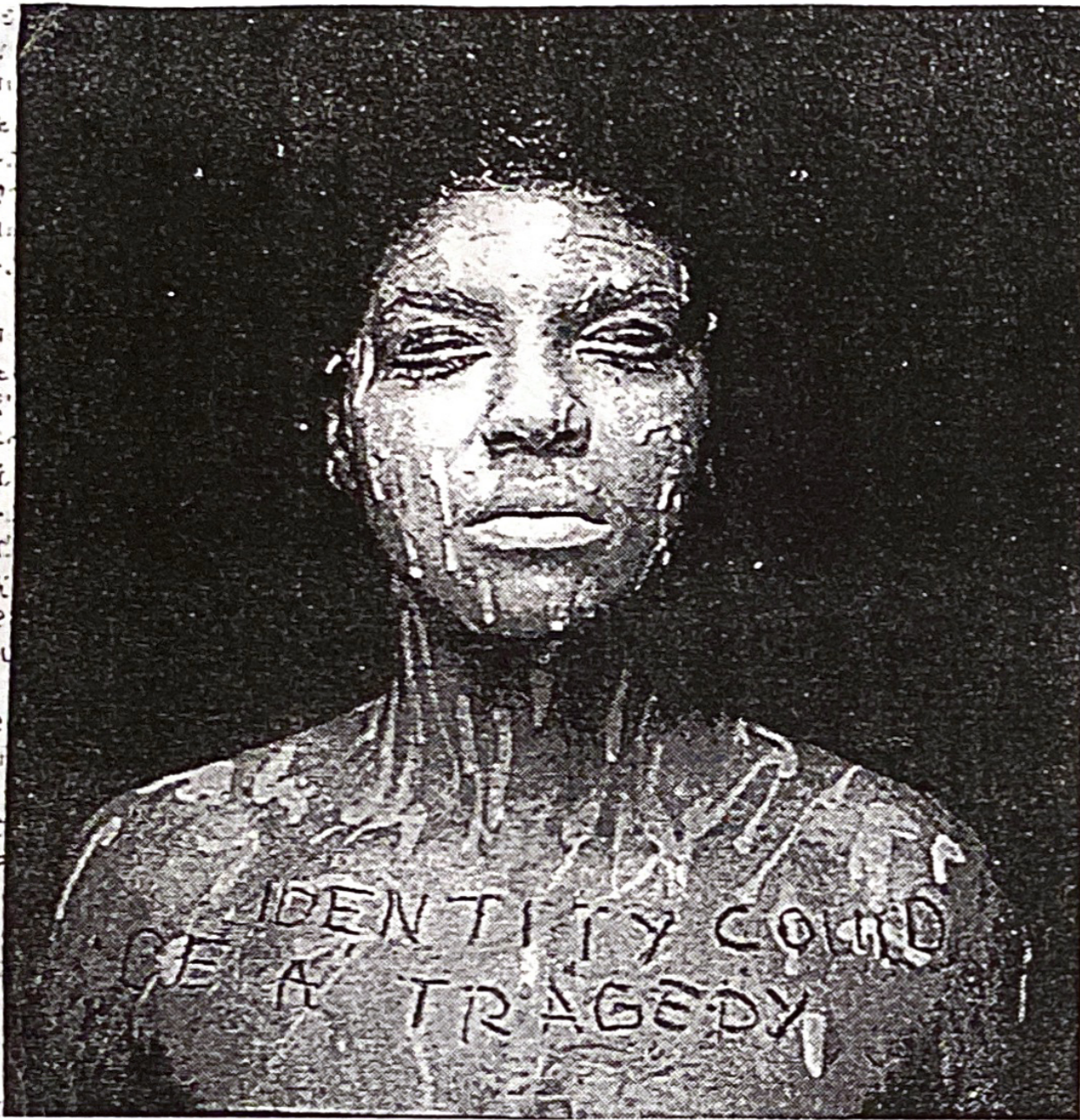


A R T

One Show Ponders a Cause and the Other Reviews a Heritage



Part of triptych "When I Am Not Here" by María-Magdalena Campos-Pons, above, and "Till Death Do Us Part" by Anaida Hernandez.

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE BRONX Lehman College Art Gallery is divided into neat halves, and for the current exhibition the separation is specifically useful. Each half contains an elaborate installation, which is markedly different in temperament and rhythm from the other. "Till Death Do Us Part" by Anaida Hernandez is fraught with urgency, while "A Town Portrait" by María Magdalena Campos-Pons is a remembrance of things past.

Ms. Hernandez, who is from Puerto Rico, was moved to make her work by threatened changes to a 1990 law in her country, which made domestic violence a crime. In an interview with the gallery director, Susan Hoeltzel, Ms. Hernández said many politicians had been accused under the law. With the help of a journalist who gained access to police records,

Ms. Hernandez found the names, ages and dates of death of 100 women killed by their husbands between 1990 and 1993. These facts are handwritten in a florid script at the base of the installation.

The main part of the work is a large grid with basically a horizontal orientation. It is composed of shallow boxes standing upright, which are modeled after those ubiquitous boxes containing flowers or other mementoes from mourners in cemeteries in San Juan where burial is above ground. But Ms. Hernandez has instead painted on the bottom of each black box brightly colored imagery that addresses the fragmentation caused by domestic violence.

One saying declares that sometimes a public sacrifice is necessary. The families of some victims were reluctant to have a case made public, but Ms. Hernandez, who showed the work first in a public building in San Juan, felt that such a blatant illustration was the only way to preserve the

domestic violence law.

Art created to serve a political cause often emphasizes rhetoric over any quality that can emotionally affect the viewer. Ms. Hernandez makes sure her installation has a subtle and lasting impact by making her symbols and their execution lively enough to keep the viewer's eye moving around the work to let the artist's intentions sink in. She seems to have a playful bent, which leavens her harsh messages: an ancillary piece, "Crucigrama," is an outsize crossword puzzle having roughly the same format as the major work. The letters in the squares, each made by hand and having an original twist, form intersecting Spanish words that refer to domestic violence. In a glass case is a large book of stories, which Ms. Hernandez illustrated. The stories are about relationships between the sexes and are sometimes bawdy. It is reassuring to discover that this artist on a mission can see beyond the wreckage.

Ms. Campos-Pons's illustration is spare and reminiscent of a desert. This sensation underlines her awareness that she now exists between two cultures: she was born of African heritage in Cuba in a town called La Vega, but she has lived in the United States since 1991, now in Boston.

"A Town Portrait" is based on memories of La Vega, which was a sugar mill in the 19th century, and Ms. Campos-Pons evokes its architectural remains through four structures: a distillery tower, a wall, a doorway and a fountain. They are constructed variously of clay, copper, steel and blown glass. If the structures at first seem like Minimalist sculptures, they are turned into conveyors of feeling by the writing that covers them. The units comprising them are brick-like, and the elemental Spanish words seem to be as carefully poured as the bricks, like:

"The tower was the place that let me know that home was near. How

long had it been there and what was hidden between its red bricks?" Circling the fountain is, "We made garlands of wildflowers," referring to a girlhood activity. The wall relates, in part: "In La Vega we used to celebrate the African religious ceremony at Nengo's house. The ceremony included animal sacrifices. These were later cooked for the participants' dinner."

Elsewhere in her half of the gallery, Ms. Campos-Pons has set up an elaborate video installation, while her themes remain simple. A viewer can speculate that it is her base in Boston, where advanced technology has been an identifiable feature of the indigenous art, which has allowed her to let images of tropical trees appear in her cupped hands and then vanish as she runs water through her hands. The video projection is a meditation on what the guest curator, Julia Herzberg, calls, "The ephemeral nature of re-collecting." Another installation features the

faces of family members projected on the seat of a rocking chair. Two photographic works composed of large-format Polaroid images have what might be called low-tech subject matter. "Opening One's Path" refers to Ms. Campos-Pons's Santería background with its emphasis on ritual, and "When I Am Not Here" includes photographic portraits of the artist covered in white and brown makeup, and a commentary on the shifting nature of racial and political identity in the contemporary world. Throughout Ms. Campos-Pons's exhibition, the viewer is made aware that her Nigerian ancestors were taken to Cuba as slaves to work in the sugar mill. But instead of harsh memories, she disarms the viewer's usual expectations by summoning up something sweet.

Installations by Ms. Hernandez and Ms. Campos-Pons are at the Lehman College Art Gallery through May 16. For information, call (718) 960-8731.