

MODERN PAINTERS

November 2010

NEW YORK

Santiago Sierra

Team Gallery // September 19–October 23

THE SPANISH ARTIST Santiago Sierra is a seasoned inciter of controversy, but it would be a mistake to view his first solo show at Team Gallery as superficial shock art. Sure, the central subject here is interracial anal sex—for money—but Sierra takes that purposefully edgy setup and conjures something that's both conceptually and visually intriguing. The artist hired various nonprofessionals to engage in (protected) rear-entry intercourse while being videotaped and photographed. He courted both black and white participants, pairing them in eight combinations: black men with white women, white women with white men, black men with white men, and so on. He staged the art orgy in a rented warehouse in Barcelona and filmed everything on Día de la Raza, Spain's equivalent of Columbus Day. Somehow the aesthetics of the resulting 49-minute video and photographs prove more interesting than their conceptual underpinnings (although it's undoubtedly good

fun to engage in a spirited discussion of who's fucking and who's getting fucked, in geopolitical terms). As a representative from Team remarked when I visited, there's a certain resonance with Minimalism in "Los Penetrados," the title of both the show and the project. Before you start laughing—and while Donald Judd rolls over in his grave—she's right. The works' beauty lies in Sierra's almost obsessive, pyramidal arrangement of the 10 blankets—dark rectangles bisected by two vertical stripes—on which all this sex occurs (for certain of the combinations, such as black women with white men, Sierra failed to find 10 willing participants, so some of the blankets are unoccupied). This elegant geometry is enhanced by the symmetry of the actors and their reflection in two walls of mirrors, which provide interesting vantage points, in that one couple glimpsed in silhouette is also visible from other, less flattering angles (the participants' faces, and some of their tattoos, are pixilated out). The effect is like observing an altar in some obscure church dedicated to sodomy.

The show's large-scale

black-and-white photographs are fine works in their own right, studies in pattern and reflection ("Espaldas de los Penetrados," a second series of photos—55 shots of the backs of penetrated subjects—is less interesting), and the video complements them. Watching so much on-screen coitus can get boring, but one starts to observe the stylistic divides among couples—the incremental differences in how backs are arched, for instance, or variations in tempo and enthusiasm. When one of the males achieves climax, the pair remain on their blanket, waiting a bit awkwardly for the penetrator to resume action. (Quit blushing—this is high culture we're talking about.)

Perhaps more than Minimalism, Sierra's stunt here is a form of endurance art, using other people's bodies as raw material. He's done the same thing before, of course, hiring workers in Italy, for example, and having them buried up to their necks in dirt. This sort of art is easy to dismiss as mainly intended to infuriate the conservative right wing, but Sierra's provocation clearly has goals greater than simply eliciting disgust or titillation.

—Scott Indrisek

