

## Honoring vows

Coco Fusco explores religious devotion

BY CATHY BYRD

**Cuban-born and** New York-based Coco Fusco is an artist, writer and curator best known for her performance of *The Couple in the Cage*. Created in collaboration with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, the

**performance art**

startlingly realistic presentation featuring the two "undiscovered Amerindians" exposed the relationship between racism and ethnographic display.

Georgia State University's Visiting Artists program brings Fusco to town Jan. 29, when she will present her newest performance, *Votos/Vows*, at Nexus Contemporary Art Center.

*Votos*, first presented at the third annual Performance Festival in Odense, Denmark, last September is described as an intimate performance that examines the artist's attraction to religious devotion. A recent interview with Fusco revealed how her work has evolved.

CL: What drew you to performance art in the first place?

CF: I like the energy of being around people and the specific problems of dealing with live bodies in space. Performance is an area where I have something unique to say.

How does *Votos* materialize what you see as the corporeal language of Latin Catholicism?

*Corpus Delecti: Performance of the Americas*, the book I just edited, talks about the centrality of Catholic ritual in developing performance language for Latin Americans. Contemporary artists without that vocabulary would be nowhere.

A particular concept that I work with is the importance of the body for women. There is a history of representing Christ as woman and mother and stereotyping them as all flesh. I keep researching and learning about contemporary *Latina penitentes* and about women who were mystics in the 17th century. One, Saint Teresa of Avila in Spain, was a theological writer from the early Renaissance. She wrote amazing essays about her visions of making love with Christ. She had visions in a cataleptic state. I was interested in phenomena like that. I was also drawn to the idea because I was raised a Catholic. My cousin is a bishop, and my father's sister was a cloistered nun. I remember visiting her as a child. We could only see her hands reaching out from between the bars.

How does your performance relate to the work of early body artists?

There's something very pure about

that work. It was very resolutely uncommercial. It was sensorial and dedicated to exploring ideas. The more I read about mystics, the more they seem a reincarnation — there's a retreat from commercialism and consumerism in that work. Some people think, 'Oh, I'll drive a nail through my hand and be Chris Burden.' It doesn't work that way.

Your work often explores myths connected with the Latin American culture. In the past, your target always seemed to be the Western popular imagination. How has your focus shifted in recent work?

I'm part of a generation where cultural issues were the dominant paradigm. The performance of people of color was influenced by the politics of the '60s. Consciousness raising was a kind of overshadowing. The dominant cultural institutions expected that; they wanted artists of color to come and solve problems.

At this point I'm interested in work that stimulates me in a lot of ways and is not so simple. The lesson that America is a racist country is not news to us. There's always a part of art that opens someone up, but my message is not prescriptive or didactic. Ultimately that doesn't work or satisfy a sophisticated audience; they are more open to experiences that are not a part of everyday life.

You present a contrast to the performance of more theatrical artists like Karen Finley and Laurie Anderson. What is your relationship with the audience?

My work is intimate and interactive. I feel like there was a push in the '80s with monologue artists to be more like theater. I'm not so sure that was a great thing to happen to performance. First, it was too much financial pressure to sell tickets. Then, theater builds an expectation in the audience for a big spectacle. I don't want to be an actress. I don't want to force myself. My performance strength lies in the specificity of the viewer's relationship with other live encounters that are more revealing and less predictable.

I'm not saying that the NEA should fund what I do. I'm not even applying anymore. I don't want to have anything to do with it. What I do is valid, even if it doesn't sell. ♦

Coco Fusco presents *Votos/Vows* Jan. 29 at 7 p.m. at Nexus Contemporary Art Center, 535 Means St. \$6 general admission, \$4 Nexus members, students and GSU faculty. Fusco presents a lecture Jan. 27 at 2 p.m. at Georgia State's University Student Center at the corner of Gilmer and Courtland streets.



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