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BEST OF ARTFORUM

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BARCELONA

Hannah Collins

CAIXAFORUM

Titles are most certainly one clue to the meaning (or at least part of the meaning) of a work of art. Hannah Collins has given a generic name—"Current History"—to her exhibition in Barcelona. This is also the name of three film projections (all 2007), included in the show, that the artist made in collaboration with inhabitants of Beshentsevo and Niznij Novgorod, towns between the rivers Volga and Oka in central Russia. But in naming this survey of her recent work, Collins elides the specific narrative of her venture into Russia, instead encapsulating all the individuals in her films and photographs under the broad concept of history. The protagonists of *La Mina*, 2001–2004, and *Parallel*, 2007, the two other film installations now on exhibit in Barcelona, are individuals with an array of difficulties (economic, social, personal); like the Russians chronicled by the artist, they have largely been uprooted and are isolated from the comfortable life of the well-to-do. Collins turns away from the version of history that focuses on political figures and other protagonists of books, encyclopedias, and the media, to articulate histories of the simple and humble, individuals whose lives take place at the margins of the florid global capitalism of recent decades. This is certainly true of the gypsies who live in La Mina, a neighborhood to the west of the Catalan capital, and of the three African immigrants in Europe who feature in *Parallel*.

In dealing with such highly sensitive subject matter—people who live on the border of poverty and social exclusion—it is reasonable to wonder if, with this work, the artist is subject to what could

be called the "parachute effect": What effect does the documentarian, the anthropologist, the interloper in a foreign region have on the lives of the people who do live there? Collins, though British, has lived in Barcelona—so *La Mina*, at least, may be immune to the potential criticism implied by this question. The works dealing with Africa and Russia are another matter. Does the artist have the informed consent of the people she represents? Have they participated in deciding on how their lives are presented and exhibited? Can art alter or leave a trace on the subjects it portrays, such as the three protagonists of *Parallel* (Constantine Diomonde, Dewa Abdousalaam, and Pamela Anyoti, who emigrated to London, Madrid, and Rome, respectively, from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa)? What does "leaving a trace" mean? These are difficult questions, and while Collins's work is to be admired for raising them, that is not enough. For some time, she has been drawn to places that convey a sense of desolation and melancholy, places where the stories of people largely unknown take place. Yet the artist's predilection for presenting her imagery on a monumental scale creates a kind of dissonance: These formats give the work a spectacular quality out of keeping with the intimacy implied by the narratives.

—Juan Vicente Aliaga

Translated from Spanish by Jane Brödie.

Hannah Collins,
*Untitled (dos
hermanos, Moscú)*
(Two Brothers,
Moscow), 2006,
color photograph,
43¼ x 54".

