

A 'Notorious' new space for Samson Projects

By Cate McQuaid
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The dust will barely have settled in Samson Projects' new space, still under construction well into this week, when the gallery's inaugural show opens today. Called "Notorious Impropriety," it's bound to kick up yet more dust.

Camilo Alvarez, co-director of the gallery, stands in the space as a workman sweeps up. Outside, jackhammers roar as work frantically proceeds along the plaza off Harrison Avenue where many galleries hope to move into new digs in the next few weeks.

Alvarez has been unpacking art for "Notorious Impropriety." He glances at the front window. "I'll have to put a sign: 'Strong Sexual Content,'" he says.

Sex is only one of the hot buttons Alvarez and guest curator Franklin Sirmans intend to push with "Notorious Impropriety."

"We looked at what can get some dialogue going and be somewhat cutting edge, when there is no cutting edge anymore," says Sirmans over the phone from New York.

The works comment on politics, race, **SAMSON PROJECTS, Page C20**



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/BILL GREENE

Alexandra Cherubini and Camilo Alvarez are partners in the Samson Projects gallery.

Samson moves to the cutting edge

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and sex; they draw from sources, like hip-hop and pornography, that grab hold of society's imagination.

They vary in media from performance to video to painting and photography; the artists range from emerging to established, although Sirmans points out that most of them are under 35. While much of the work may elicit a gasp, just as much will provoke laughter.

The more prominent artists include Iona Zeal Brown and Luis Gispert. Both examine and utilize hip-hop's cultural cachet, blending gangsta overtones with more innocent or subdued imagery. For Gispert, that innocence comes in the All-American guise of a cheerleader done up with tattoos and plenty of bling as she stands beside a grill waiting for her meat in his photograph "BBQ 2." Brown traveled to Japan and saw there a fascination with the hip-hop look: young Japanese sporting deep tans and dreadlocks. Her depiction of these characters, in a style echoing traditional Japanese portraiture, is shocking and funny.

As for the sexual content, look no further than Jeremy Bailey, a young artist from Toronto. In his video "Strongest Man," he holds the camera at arm's length and aims it at his face as — the suggestion is — his girlfriend pleasures him below. It's riveting in a voyeuristic way.

When he put it online, a handful of porn websites picked it up, much to his delight. Bailey intends to point out more about his audience's assumptions and predilections than his own.

The video "implies the sexual, but it's not actually happening," he admits, over the phone from Syracuse, where he's in an MFA program. "It relies on the viewer's inability to stay clean."

Jeff Sonhouse, Alison Kuo, Jacqueline Salloum, and Wardell Milan all tackle issues of race. Salloum's video, "Planet of the Arabs," is a montage of cuts from feature films spot-

lighting Arabs.

"In one scene, Chuck Norris walks into a cafe where Arabs are eating," Alvarez relates. "He picks up their food and says 'What is this slop?'"

Milan just got his masters from Yale. He's a gay African-American photographer who builds dioramas that retell scenes from American history, into which he inserts images of himself. He then makes large-scale digital photographs of the scenes.

"They're surreal and fantastical. They mesh periods and social icons and pop imagery into one whole, collective image," Milan says from his home in New York. "I play myself in these periods, to put myself in dialogue with others. I've used George Bush, Reagan, and Nixon. In one, I play King Kong."

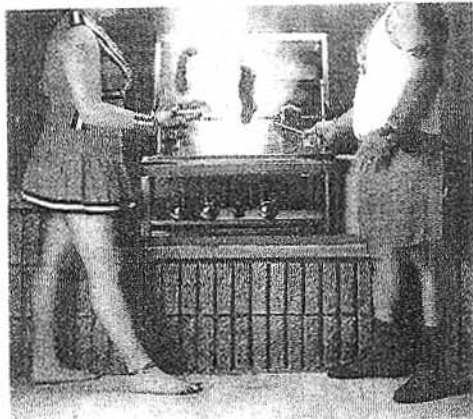
In "Tropicks," he borrows the black-and-white photos of black people by African artist Seydou Keita, taken from the 1940s to the 1960s, and sets them in a jungle. "I was looking at the Garden of Eden, the beginning of man, Africa," Milan says. "I act out the progression of man, from hunched over to man of today. I put in rap stars, modern-day pop images. I like using hip-hop musicians beside historical figures, to create a dialogue."

"Notorious Impropriety" can be seen as a signature show for Samson Projects, and for Alvarez and his co-director, business manager Alexandra Cherubini. Like the works in the exhibit, the gallery aims to cross boundaries.

Alvarez, who has worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at Exit Art/The First World, an experimental space in New York, as well as other galleries, wants Samson Projects to blend the risky nature of alternative venues with the profitability of a commercial gallery.

As a commercial space, Samson Projects will sell art. But unlike most galleries, it will have no stable of artists.

"I think rosters are inhibiting," Alvarez declares. "The model is dying. These days, artists



PHOTO/LUIS GISPERT

Luis Gispert blends innocence with hip-hop imagery in "BBQ 2."

have galleries in many cities, and online. It's a changing world, and there's room for hybrids."

Like a nonprofit, Samson Projects will set up educational programs. A partnership with United South End Settlements for high school students and a professional development series for artists are in the works. It all comes together in a voracious range — of media, and of artists of all ages, races, and nationalities.

"We want to mix emerging, established, and under-recognized artists," Alvarez says. "The emerging artists will be able to see the influences they have. We'll introduce them into history."

That thread of history could be seen in "An Accumulation of Convention: En Masse," the previous show at Samson Projects, in the smaller Waltham Street space where the gallery debuted last spring. All the artists were Massachusetts-born. They ran the gamut from James Abbott McNeill Whistler to Frank Stella to Matthew Rich, just out of art school. The exhibit risked being all over the map, but Alvarez put it together in a fresh, surprising way.

For Sirmans, working on "Notorious Impropriety" has been a thrill. You just don't see these kinds of shows in New York galleries, he says.

"You go up and down the streets of Chelsea, and you know what you'll get," Sirmans says. "This was a chance to have fun with an exhibition, to deal with really serious topics, but with humor."