

## Art in America December 2004

### Nari Ward at Deitch Projects

By Sarah Valdez

Nari Ward didn't need to use actual, smelly codfish in order to make his first solo show in New York in eight years off-pulling. But he did it anyhow. The Harlem-based artist-who grew up in Jamaica, immigrated to the United States at the age of 12 and now teaches at Hunter College-set up a "reading room" in the small, dingy basement of Deitch Projects' sprawling Wooster Street gallery; a rectangular wooden table sprinkled with salt, upon which he arranged bits of dried, malodorous fish in a decorative pattern. On the table, framed pages from a monograph of artworks in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Robert Lehman Collection rested behind Plexiglas of the sort used for check-cashing windows, with holes for speaking through. The catalogue illustrations are accompanied by tedious descriptive text written by Lehman's son; "the virgin has golden-brown hair" or "the electrical tape and feathers. According to the artist, these "Copulation Works" resemble sexual positions, including *Doggy*, 69 and *Missionary*, none of which revealed themselves to me. For another sculpture, Ward appropriated from an immigration office a scratched-up plastic desk with tattered advertisements for Czech beer and Arizona iced tea still stuck to it. conjuring up the dismal experience of getting a pointedly shabby reception while attempting to acquire citizenship in the richest country in the world.

Tackling the challenge of filling up the largest gallery, Ward stuck the rear ends of more than 300 black television sets on a wall. On the protruding parts, he draped pieces of white Kleenex, perhaps alluding to the stark loneliness that comes from TV-induced emotion. For another installation, he strung up plain white bath towels on a laundry line, cordoning off the nicest piece in the show and unfortunately keeping viewers from seeing it up close. *Glorry*, a horizontally oriented tanning booth is made from an oil barrel. The black stars and stripes on the glass shelf inside led me to imagine a person with emblems of nationality grotesquely emblazoned on his or her skin; it also obliquely brought up the all-too-messy relationship involving the U.S., oil and Arab countries.

With his anti-precious esthetic and vague references to race, I got from this show the general sense that Ward is angry at the United States and pissed off about the impact of our empire on the rest of the world. Who could blame him for that? And what could be more pertinent right now?