

Watch Yourself Be Watched, but Watch It

By SARA GEBHARDT
Washington Post Staff Writer

Video cameras are part of the modern landscape. They are seemingly everywhere: on the street, in the workplace, at airports and retail stores—even in art galleries.

At a time when more than just conspiracy theorists believe that Big Brother is keeping constant tabs on them, Ann Stoddard has turned the idea of surveillance and profiling in the post-Sept. 11 era into art.

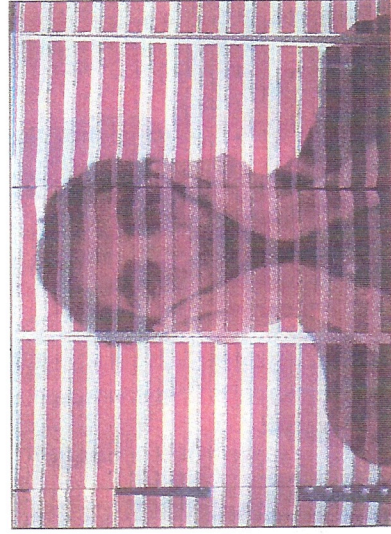
The Adelphi artist created an interactive multimedia installation at Harmony Hall Regional Center in Fort Washington in which viewers are confronted with their own images as seven video cameras follow them around the gallery.

"Random Subjects," which runs through Jan. 17, combines images of viewers with sound and video projections that represent Arab Americans culture and how Arab Americans have been treated since Sept. 11, 2001. Stoddard describes the installation as a fusion of layers of words, narrative and photography that explores "free speech, the First Amendment and assumptions about democracy."

"People have gotten accustomed to surveillance and hadn't questioned it. How can you have a multicultural democracy with this profiling?" she asked.

So she profiles the viewers, who

Artist's Installation Uses Video Cameras to Show Non-Arabs What It's Like to Be Profiled, Followed Since 9/11 Attacks



A projected image, left, shows Egyptian American student Raef Haggag, who plays the part of "the Agent" in the "Random Subjects" exhibition, superimposed on the U.S. flag. Haggag's image, right, is projected onto lace cloth.

are confronted by multiple images of themselves on television monitors, a computer screen and large walls scattered about the gallery. Many of the monitors operate on a taped delay so that a person may see themselves entering the gallery when they are already immersed in the middle of the show.

At the same time, there are several different backdrops for the viewer to look at, including white lace curtains projecting the image of Raef Haggag, an Egyptian American student at the University of Maryland in College Park who plays the part of "the Agent." Dressed in a suit and tie, the Arab

American college senior becomes the profiler and questions the viewers, asking where they are coming from, what their destination is, their nationality, their religion, Social Security number, if they traveled outside of the United States after Sept. 11, 2001, and other personal information.

The questioning, played over and over, joins a mix of images and sounds, including that of Shukri Abed, chairman of the language department for the Middle East Institute and a professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, who is pictured on a television screen talking in Arabic. Proj-

ected onto gigantic drapery fashioned out of 30 American flags is Haggag's image as he sings the Muslim call to prayer, and in the corner of the gallery, a videotape of Haggag discussing his identity also plays.

Interspersed with the constantly flowing images and sounds are two walls plastered with Arabic language newspapers from the United States and Arabic countries. Both black and white and color collages on each wall point to connections between the Arabic and American cultures, including news items about American sports and advertisements for East Coast

tax and immigration attorneys.

Part of Stoddard's interest in Arabic culture stems from her having lived and worked in Morocco during the 1970s, after she finished graduate school. For more than 25 years, Stoddard has held solo and group exhibitions throughout the country, including two recent similarly themed installations in which gallery-goers were profiled—"Surveilling Utopia" at the Greenbelt Arts Center and "Application Center, Waiting Room" at ART-O-MATIC in Washington.

By making a large-scale installation with layers of stimuli, rather than just using small television monitors associated with surveillance, Stoddard hopes to provoke thought and discussion about identity, the First Amendment and racial profiling.

"Art is a process, and the meaning is not a given," she explained. "Viewers are constructing a meaning, and art is not separate from other parts of life."

"Random Subjects" runs

through Jan. 17. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. A closing reception will be held Jan. 17 from 1 to 3:30 p.m. in the gallery at Harmony Hall Regional Center, 10701 Livingston Rd., Fort Washington. Free. 301-434-0304.

COURTESY OF ANN STODDARD