Show at Studio Museum Of Its Artists in Residence

By MICHAEL BRENSON

The artists in residence program at the Studio Museum in Harlem has been in existence since 1989, and it remains, according to the curator Grace Stanislaus, "the key program, the one that really defines who we are as an institution." Each year, work by the previous year's three resident artists is shown at the museum. This year's exhibition is a clear sign of the program's strength.

The artists — each of whom was provided with $13,000 and studio space within the museum — are Willie Cole, who is 34 years old and from New Jersey; Renée Green, 30, from Ohio, and John Rozelle, 45, from Missouri. All three have a strong feeling for the materials they combine. All three are involved in some way with the issue of exoticism. All three work with ideas and themes from black history in ways that are intended to be both pointed and poetic.

Ms. Green has studied the painful saga of the Hottentot Venus, a black woman from South Africa whose real name is unknown. The size and shape of her buttocks fascinated Europeans, who turned her into a specimen and sideshow. She died in 1815 at the age of 23.

Ms. Green combines found objects, words from 19th-century scientific, ethnological and literary texts, and painting. In "Permitted," there is a stenciled image of the Hottentot Venus and stenciled remarks about her on the Masonite surface by Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin and founder of the eugenics movement. Other comments by this English scientist are stenciled on the wood slats spread across the surface like the bars of a prison or cage.

In "Sa Main Charmante," there are also slats, this time covered with an assortment of 19th-century remarks. This work, too, is a commentary on human beings as a peep show. But this installation is also like a memorial. And it is shaped like a human figure that stares back.

Ms. Green's work is not didactic. She has the gift of recognizing stories and passages that speak for themselves, and the timing to know what passages to use and where.

Just as important, her work is an argument against naming and a categorization and what she sees as the pseudo-objectivity of science. Her content is political, but she is like a poet in her effort to use words against words. Art for her is clearly a way of going beyond classification and tracts and creating an experience that is infused with feeling, knowledge and memory — that can be, to use a word she likes, ineffable.