

A Sanitation Worker's Collection of Salvaged Objects

Whether objects are considered trash or treasure depends on how we care for and arrange them.



Louis Bury September 7, 2019

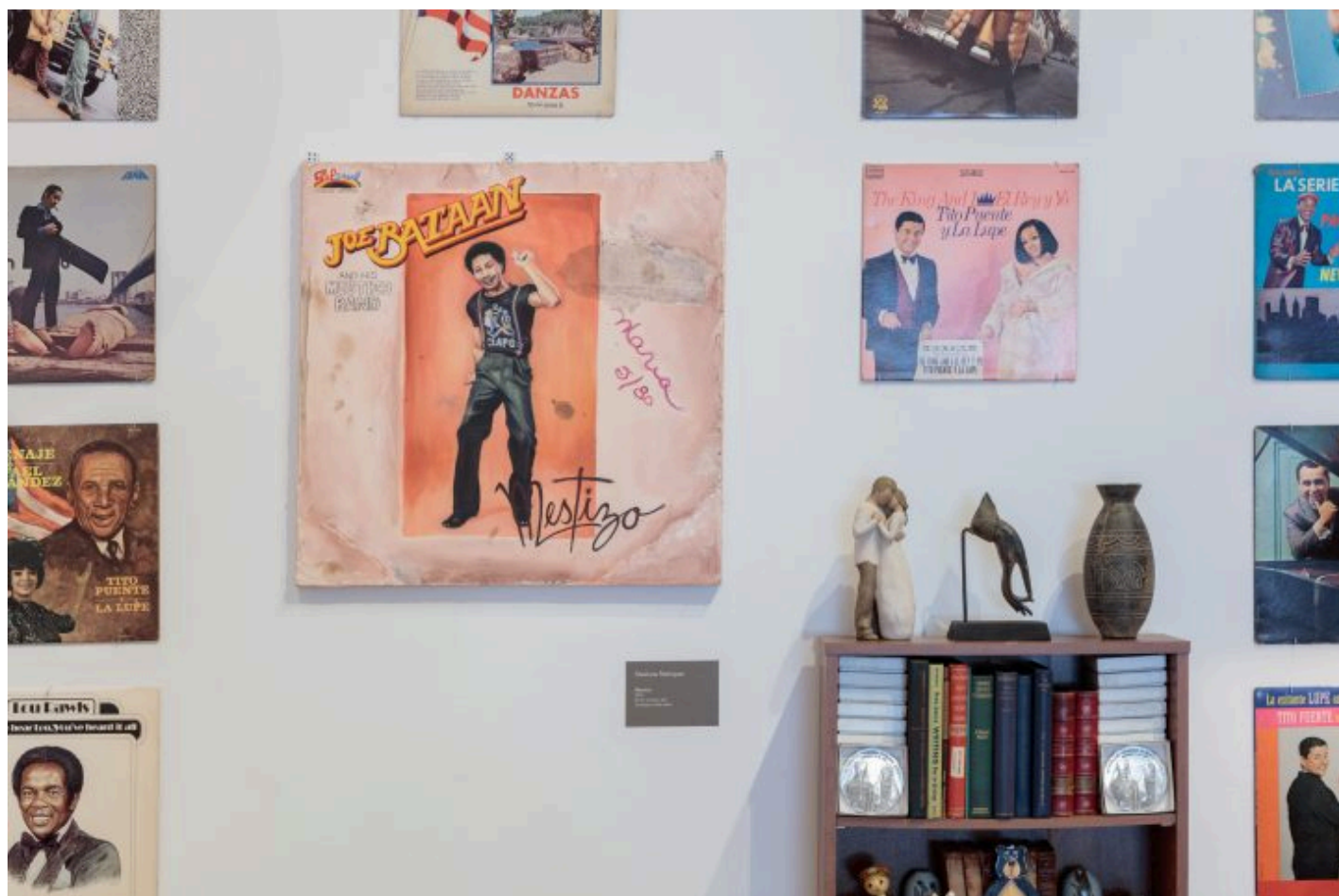


All photos by Stan Narten; courtesy of Hunter East Harlem Gallery.

Two prominent signs hang in the street-facing window of Hunter East Harlem Gallery: “REALTORS = VULTURES,” in white-stenciled letters on a black background, and, below, “*Open/* MASSAGE,” in neon green, red, and blue. The signs come from the Treasures in the Trash Collection, a remarkable congeries of over 40,000 discarded objects salvaged by retired sanitation worker Nelson Molina and arranged in a New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) garage. The understated humor of the MASSAGE sign tempers the blunt political

message of the REALTORS sign above. It is a fitting contrast in an exhibition inspired by artist Fred Wilson’s satirical yet serious institutional critiques. Co-curated by Molina and artist Alicia Grullón, *What is Here is Open: Selections from the Treasures in the Trash Collection* is also a fitting exhibition for Hunter East Harlem Gallery, which is located near Molina’s former DSNY route and has a mission to engage its local community.

The exhibition’s conceit — pairing selections from Molina’s Collection with works by five contemporary, mostly local artists — highlights the somewhat arbitrary value some cultural objects accrue, but not others, often along racial lines. The coffee table display of Dominique Duroseau’s self-portrait color photographs (from “being as, femininity as, black as...,” 2018-ongoing), amid antique black-and-white photographs of white women, signals this theme through contrasts in the photographs’ colors and ages. Tomie Arai’s “Beyond the Streets” (2019) — a sleek, silkscreen on plywood bird’s-eye street map of New York City’s Chinatown — contemplates how a compartmentalized racial logic can manifest at the level of urban neighborhoods. Shellyne Rodriguez’s two contributions are in keeping with the vintage mood and demotic sensibility of Molina’s Collection: her three watercolor portraits, based on family photographs taken in the South Bronx, have the folksy eclecticism of the show’s abundant amateur portraiture; and her oil-on-canvas reproduction of an album cover by New York Latin soul musician Joe Bataan (*Mestizo*, 2013) has a charming campiness.



Surrounded by a grid of actual record sleeves from Molina’s Collection, “Mestizo”’s placement

attests to the curators' organizational intent, evident in everything from bookshelves lined with vintage glassware grouped by color to the umbrella shapes positioned near Maria Hupfield's droopy, gray felt reproduction of an umbrella, part of her delightful "1 of 1: New York" (2019) series. The orderly presentation of salvaged objects feels jarring but is precisely the point: which objects count as trash and which as treasure is in part determined by how we care for and arrange them. Just as Fred Wilson's seminal *Mining the Museum* (1992) rearranged the collections of the Maryland Historical Society to highlight the museum's racial biases, *What is Here is Open* remixes Molina's Collection to highlight our trash's racial unconscious. What is opened up here — and what is open in the Treasures in the Trash Collection but less so in museums and galleries — is a sense of what art can be and who it can be by.

What is Here is Open: Selections from the Treasures in the Trash Collection *continues at Hunter East Harlem Gallery (2180 Third Ave, New York) until September 14.*