Art Review: Karlos Carcamo’s 'Till the Break of Dawn: Blue' at Gallery Aferro

Cyanotype handcuff murals will be hung in the windows of Gallery Aferro as part of Activate Market Street, an ongoing project to light the block near Essex County Courthouse. (Courtesy Gallery Aferro)

By Dan Bischoff | For The Star-Ledger
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on March 29, 2015 at 1:31 PM, updated April 03, 2015 at 10:16 AM

Gallery Aferro has large storefront windows at 85 Market St. in Newark, and through April 18 the alternative art space will be filling those windows with large cyanotype murals by Karlos Carcamo that make lovely patterns out of handcuffs and keys, part of his one-man...
show, "Till the Break of Dawn: Blue." Inside there are large canvasses where police billy clubs appear to smear blue half-disks of paint on the picture surface, and sculptures made from Public Enemy albums bent into vinyl taco shells with intense heat.

Seeing images like these just down the block from the Essex County Courthouse will almost certainly trigger thoughts about the recent spate of protests against police brutality in communities of color around the country.

"I didn't have a specific incident in mind," says Carcamo, 47, who was born in El Salvador and grew up, from the age of five, in Jamaica, Queens. "Police shootings and violence are just part of urban life, nothing really new about that. When I was a kid doing graffiti, I remember the Michael Stewart case." (Stewart was arrested by the police for spray-painting a subway station on 1st Ave. in Manhattan in 1983 and died 13 days later, never coming out of a coma induced by a severe beating; his death sparked widespread protest.)

"I think the images can be read both ways," Carcamo says. "I think the first thing a passerby will notice is the patterns--I was actually thinking about Sol LeWitt, who makes abstract pictures by sending a formula to someone else who does the actual painting. My work tries to be a reflection of urban culture through artistic practice. Police and police violence are just a part of daily life in any urban community.

"I've shown at Aferro before, and I knew where these pictures would be shown. I wanted to address that community. I wanted people walking by, people who don't necessarily think fine art is ever aimed at them, to be grabbed by the images."

"Blue" headlines "Activate Market Street 5," Aferro's ongoing project to light up Market St. with art exhibits that make the largely closed-out furniture stores on the block glow throughout the night. Carcamo's pictures, which are made on standard sun-sensitive papers pieced together on an aluminum backboard (most are 38x57 inches), hang on false walls built within a couple feet of the shop windows and brilliantly lit from above.

"The work really depends on its context," says Jo-El Lopez, a painter who acted as guest curator for Carcamo's show. "Because of Newark's history of police riots in the '60s, you can jump to the conclusion that it's a protest. But I think you can just as easily see them the other way--a person who was pro-cop might look at them and see order personified."
Carcamo is Latino, but the inclusion of Public Enemy vinyl disks leaves little doubt that the "Black Lives Matter" protests are the underlying theme of "Blue."

Carcamo's day job is installing art at the Museum of Modern Art. He's shown similar images before: The police baton pictures, whose smeared half-disks of paint are reminiscent of abstract pictures from the 1960s by Jasper Johns that spread pigments with a ruler or a broom, were originally shown several years ago at the Museo de Arte de El Salvador. There, the disk of pigment was red, not blue. Carcamo believes the red version suggests the force of the billy club moving through space.

In fact, all of "Blue" is inspired by fine art traditions.

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"Blue is synonymous with the police in this country, but a particular shade has always been associated with French artist Yves Klein," Carcamo says. "I didn't try to recreate Klein's blue, but I was thinking about it...and about his nude models smeared with Klein Blue and used as paintbrushes."

Carcamo had never walked into an art gallery or a museum until he was in his 20s. Still, his interest in art dates to his high school days, when he was a big comics fan but wasn't so interested in studying. His counselor made a deal with him, putting two art periods back to back if he'd try harder in all his classes. Carcamo says drawing is what got him through school; but he didn't think of art as a career until he came across Robert Rauschenberg's "Combines" in Miami.

Like Rauschenberg's Combines, Carcamo assembles diverse objects in a picture to suggest a story, or at least a kind of language.

"My work is about urban issues," Carcamo says, "and there's probably nothing with so formal a language as urban culture. Except, perhaps, abstract art."

Till the Break of Dawn: Blue

Where: Gallery Aferro, 73 Market St., Newark

When: Through April 18. Open 12-6 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, and by appointment

How Much: Free. For more information see www.aferro.org.