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A 50-Year-Old Upstart Redefines 'Emerging'

By ELIZABETH BARD

AT his film studio on Lafayette Street downtown, Michael Somoroff and his team were shooting a commercial for Taco Bell: one assistant adjusted the lighting, another rearranged tomatoes and a few artfully strewn sprigs of cilantro. Two days earlier Mr. Somoroff had been standing in a Napa Valley industrial hanger, watching the final stages of construction on "Illumination I," a 12-ton sculpture to be installed on the grounds of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. All part of the double life of an up-and-coming artist.

But Mr. Somoroff is 50, and his day job is senior partner at MacGuffin Films, a multi-million-dollar commercial business. With "Illumination I" moving to the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn., on June 24, and BravinLee Programs opening a show of associated video works in Chelsea on Thursday, Mr. Somoroff is redefining what it means to be an emerging artist.

His approach is best described as Madison Avenue meets the Italian Renaissance: big budgets, large teams, high-tech tools and an artist-manager equally at ease with corporate sponsors and Chelsea gallerists. Commercial success is part of his philosophy of art. "There was a time when artists provided a real service," he said. "Michelangelo is an installation guy. He built the architecture, painted the ceiling."

"I want to put the discussion of fine art — its future, its model for production — out front, right on the table," he said. "For me that discussion is part of the work."

Mr. Somoroff grew up in the studio. His father, the commercial photographer Ben Somoroff, was a student of the designer Alexey Brodovitch, and the younger Somoroff opened his own photography studio when he was 23. After a successful show at the fledgling International Center for Photography in 1979, he left for Europe, where he worked as a magazine photographer, traveled widely and developed a taste for philosophy.

Mr. Somoroff's technical know-how and visual instincts may come from his commercial background, but the focus of his art has always been spiritual and philosophical inquiry. It is no accident that "Illumination I," the tipping point in his artistic career, was commissioned by the Rothko Chapel, a non-denominational space designed by the architect Philip Johnson as a home

for Mark Rothko's late series of 14 so-called black paintings.

The multimedia work, which has grown to include video installations, photography and even a specially commissioned musical score, began in 2005 as a commission to create a sculpture to be exhibited for several months on the grounds of the Rothko Chapel. Mr. Somoroff is the first artist to be invited to install a work on the grounds since the chapel's dedication in 1971.

His starting point for the sculpture was not the chapel itself, but the diffused light that filters through its skylight. He and his team went to Houston to film this light, which was then entered into a computer program that could simulate the light on any given day.

From there Mr. Somoroff then began collecting images of sacred spaces around the world, including ruined mosques in Afghanistan and Iraq. Taking elements from these photographs and using the original floor plan of the Rothko Chapel as a foundation, he used a 3-D animation program to create a virtual sacred space — a composite mosque. The finished sculpture is a frozen ray of light, captured as it falls through the window of that virtual space.

After the opening at the Rothko Chapel in November Mr. Somoroff began to revisit the 3-D

animations that inspired the sculpture. To call the results a video installation would be an error in scale. "I want to create a completely immersive environment," he said, "where you don't really know where you end and the video begins."

The BravinLee show includes five digital projections installed in a specially constructed pavilion on the ground floor of the gallery's building. The centerpiece is the animation of the virtual mosque, projected on a curved 45-foot screen. The mosque slowly revolves around you; over the course of the eight-minute film the architecture fades, and you are left with the just the ray of light.

For those who visit both the BravinLee installation and the sculpture at the Aldrich, there will be a moment of uncanny recognition, as the virtual form takes on a physical presence.

The "Illumination" project required a logistical and financial infrastructure equal to that of Mr. Somoroff's film business. Directly next door to the polished marble foyer of MacGuffin Films on Lafayette Street is a dim industrial stairway leading to Somoroff Studios, where Mr. Somoroff keeps a second office for his fine art practice. Somoroff Studios also works with corporate clients, using art in marketing, branding and com-



BravinLee Programs

munications strategy. And in 2006 Mr. Somoroff founded Matrix Art Collective, a full-service digital production studio that does work for other artists.

"The artist as entrepreneur is a model that's coming to the fore," said Richard Klein, exhibitions director at the Aldrich Museum. "If you are a pessimist, you look at it as the total triumph of capitalism. But as an optimist, it's the breakdown of boundaries between the art world and the business world, which are really quite synthetic."

Mr. Somoroff's commercial experience informs not only his business model but also the way he communicates with the viewer. "What is commercial about being commercial?" asked John P. Lee of BravinLee. "It's not just about making money. It's about appealing to the viewer instead of doing something purely self-reflective. Self-reflective is preaching to the choir. What makes Michael commercial is he is going to use every means possible to convince the viewer."

Like walking into a cathedral when the light hits just the right way, certain moments in the videos may produce stunned silence and a sharp intake of breath. While the sculpture was installed for three months in Houston, it became a kind of sanctuary: People slept in it, sang in it and someone, like a defiant J. D. Salinger teenager after morning chapel, put their cigarette out on it.

As a commercial director making a work of art about spirituality, Mr. Somoroff is confronting two of the contemporary art world's biggest taboos, money and religion. The spiritual aspects of the work may strike some as propaganda, and the work's professionalism — its grand scale and technical perfection — runs the risk of coming off as slickness.

Mr. Somoroff remains unapologetic: "The emotional manipulation of the viewer — that's art. The intellectual aspects are all commentary. I edit with my mind, I don't create with it."

That's the advantage of being an emerging artist at 50. Mr. Somoroff may be just beginning his rise in the world of fine art, but "Illumination" isn't an early work, and it isn't an experiment. It's a fully formed artistic vision, articulated with a career's worth of visual and technical expertise. The art world may wince. But Michelangelo wouldn't.

Above, "Illumination I" being placed at the Aldrich Museum.

Left, an image from the video installation "Illumination."

ILLUMINATION I

ALDRICH MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
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Ridgefield, Conn.;
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ILLUMINATION

BRAVINLEE PROGRAMS
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