

An initiation into occult symbolism

Reviewed: José Bedía, RHA Ely Place, Dublin, until January 5th (tel: 01-6612558); *Friendship of the Peoples*, Goshka Macuga and Declan Clarke, Project, Dublin until January 25th (tel: 1850-260027); Stefan Nikolaev, *Perfect Day*, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin until January 30th (tel: 01-6710073)

A PART altogether from the question of meaning, José Bedía's exhibition at the RHA, which includes a bravura piece of wall-painting as part of a site-specific installation, is visually impressive. The artist works on amate paper, made from tree bark, and employs a variety of regular and irregular formats. Executed with great verve and an exceptional sense of design, the paintings offer a strange, eclectic mix of imagery and iconography. From aircraft-carriers to a menagerie of demonic-looking mythic figures, the precise meanings may be obscure, but the works are without question atmospherically compelling.

Bedía's starkly coloured, elegantly linear paintings are delivered in a consistent, highly stylised manner that recalls the strict conventions of classical Egyptian representation and comparable ritualised systems of depiction. There is an almost incantatory quality to his recurrent use of animal figures, esoteric maps and other diagrams, a whiff of magic, and a belief in magic, in the way real power is imputed to signs and symbols. The question is

for the eye, the fountain works to the extent that pumped water splashes its way up and down a circuit of pools and spouts. The bandstand, though, looks as if it was put together by a confused novice carpenter without the benefit of a plan.

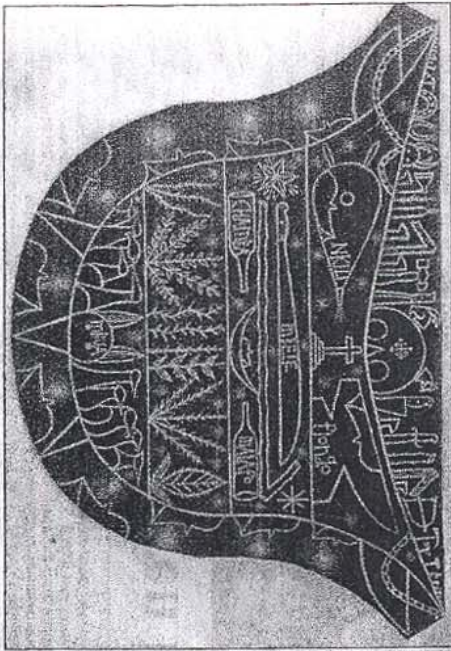
In all of which there is surely an element of satirical commentary on the way municipal amenities are packaged and on how they fall short of notional functions and qualities.

As such, it is a modestly engaging piece of work, although the size and complication of the water feature seem unwarranted in terms of the scope of the overall installation. It's as though we're glimpsing the subject of a garden makeover show when it is 80 per cent complete.

The spin put on *Friendship of the Peoples* by the accompanying note suggests much loftier ambitions, however. If you read the spiel without seeing the show, you could be forgiven for thinking it must be a heart-breaking work of staggering genius that sorts out most of the extant issues in Western culture, leaving only a few loose ends to mop up.

Stefan Nikolaev is a Bulgarian artist based in Paris, and *Perfect Day*, at the Temple Bar Gallery, features several pieces by him. His work, a brief accompanying note tells us, is concerned with our experience of time and presents moments "from everyday life in a concentrated form".

The main new piece for Temple Bar is a wall-text, a desultory narrative about meeting a friend and about the artist wondering what he's



In José Bedía's work, above, there is 'a whiff of magic in the way real power is imputed to symbols. The question is whether it is all an ironic, postmodern fake on belief systems'.

sings above the sound of the splashing water, and you can make out the words of songs by David Bowie and Lou Reed.

It's a funny, quietly effective work, conjuring up a sense of the artist, as the title suggests, in a world of his own. The remaining piece, featuring close-up shots of two heads, one of a man shaving, the other smoking, also points to moments of daily ritual when one can retreat into a personal, imaginative world.

Visual Arts

Aidan Dunne



American and Mexican communities.

There is an argument that occult beliefs flourish in the absence of real political power, and you could say that the very obscurity of Bedía's symbolism places it at one remove, confining it to an audience of initiates. But the evidence suggests that he is not being ironic, and that he is primarily interested not so much in occult symbolism for its own sake as the spiritual demeanour of peoples who have a view of the world that is fundamentally different from our own. And his work is undeniably accessible on several, if not all, of its levels of meaning — more than can be said for a lot of contemporary art.

Goshka Macuga and Declan Clarke's collaborative exhibition at the Project, *Friendship of the Peoples*, consists of a dysfunctional wooden bandstand and an appropriate fountain, roughly assembled from concrete blocks and cast concrete, plants and stucco, plus a few other elements in a similar vein. While it is not exactly a feast

whether it is all an ironic, postmodern make on a number of exclusive belief systems, or an attempt to employ underlying aspects of those systems in a genuine, exploratory project.

While Bedía can never be at one with a person who lived within a closed system of belief in a tribal culture in West Africa or Mexico 200 years and more ago, he certainly doesn't come across as being 'ironic' about what he does. Rather he gives the impression of working with the authority and conviction of someone who is absolutely sure of their own language.

He is a Cuban artist, though he lives now in exile, in Miami, and an intrinsic part of his artistic personality has to do with the fact that while in Cuba, he was initiated into the African, Regla de Congo religion and is a priest in a sect of Santería, Palo Monte. Santería in 1988, as part of the Cuban military involvement there, he became interested in the spiritual world of the Angolans. Subsequently he went on to study with various native