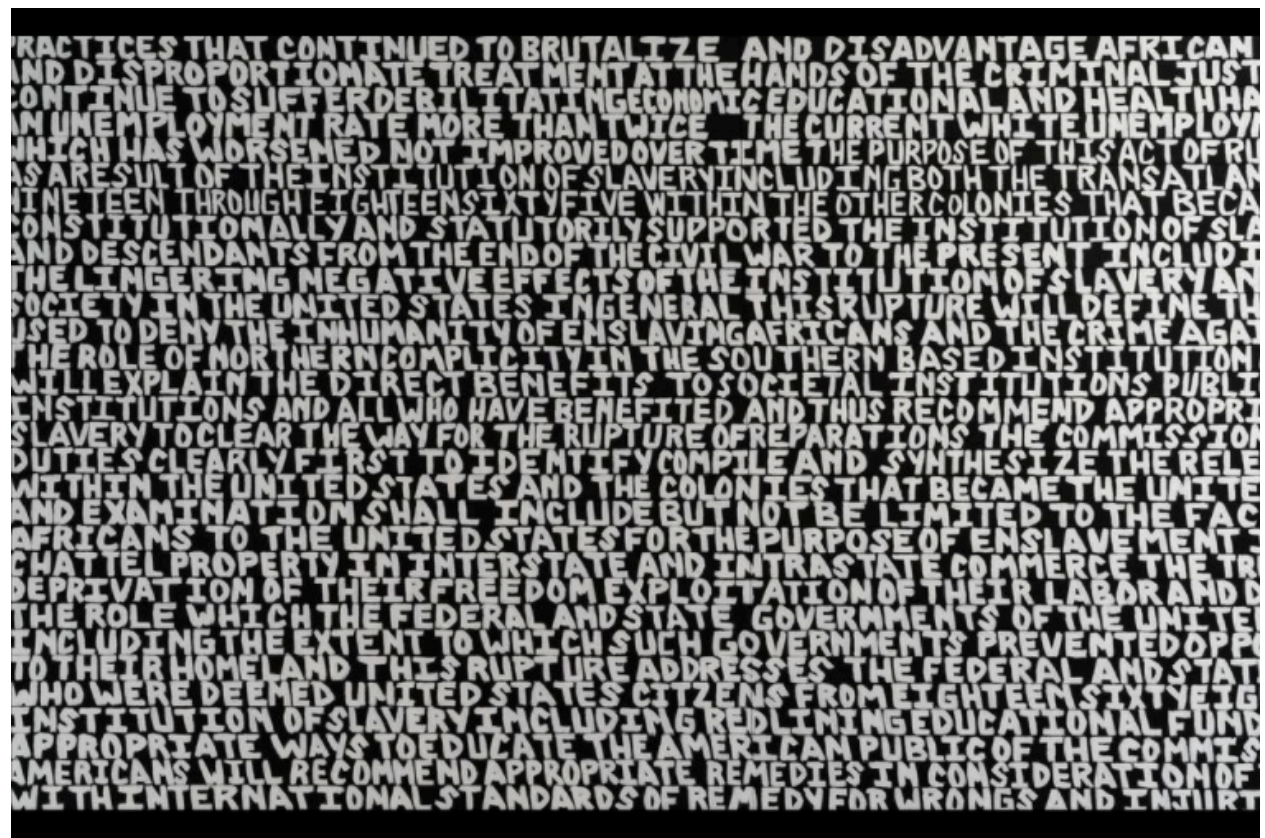


The Columbus Dispatch

‘Gray Matters’ exhibit features female works of grisaille

By Nancy Gilson / For The Columbus Dispatch

Posted Jun 26, 2017



Xaviera Simmons, Rupture (2017) Wood, acrylic paint and metal screws Site specific Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami // Image courtesy of the Wexner Center for the Arts

If an exhibit of works created entirely in tones of black, white and gray sounds monotonous — think again.

For its spring and summer exhibition, Ohio State University’s Wexner Center for the Arts has turned to 37 contemporary female artists for a remarkably diverse and exciting show of multimedia works dedicated to *grisaille*, the French term for works rendered in those neutral shades.

The Wexner's new Senior Curator of Exhibitions, Michael Goodson — previously director of the Beeler Gallery at Columbus College of Art & Design — has assembled fascinating works for “Gray Matters,” continuing through July 30 in all galleries of the center.

The exhibit, Goodson writes, “traces the persistent and in some ways, promiscuous evolution of grisaille’s historical practice, while attempting to navigate the full spectrum of so-called neutrality by probing and plumbing its complexity.”

Speaking about the artists, Goodson described them as “dramatically varied” in all aspects but gender: age, race, nationality, mediums and methods.

There is much to see, marvel at and ponder in “Gray Matters.” Most of the works require inspection and study to fully appreciate; the catalog is a valuable resource to carry along while perusing the exhibit.

The earliest work is “Heater” (1964) by New York artist Vija Celmins. The portrait of a gray space heater set against a gray background is illuminated by the glowing orange center of the heater.

That burst of color is one of the few in the exhibit, which finds its drama in other ways. Many of the artists address historical or political subject matter in ways stirring and often, uncomfortable.

New York artist Xaviera Simmons’ massive wall sculpture “Rupture” includes text from U.S. House Bill 40, a commission to study reparation proposals for African-Americans that Rep. John Conyers Jr. has presented annually to congress for more than 25 years. Between the bill’s words, Simmons frequently has inserted “rupture” — a violent word that she says refers to America’s history and legacy of slavery as well as a call to action.

Another New York artist, Arlene Shechet, has created the beautiful but poignant “Building,” a row of cream-and gray-vessels placed on a long, horizontal pedestal. The porcelain works allude to the layers of ash that covered much of Manhattan in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attack.

Mona Hatoum, born in Beirut and living in London, also spent time in Mexico City, inspiration for her “Pom Pom City.” At the center of this striking floor piece is a woven square that refers to craft artists as well as the city’s center. Spreading out from the square — as roads spread out into the countryside — are tendrils of wool that culminate in pompoms.

Just as Andy Warhol memorialized Marilyn Monroe as a symbol of (celebrity) womanhood via his portraits, Brooklyn artist Michalene Thomas seeks to

document the underrepresented African-American woman with “Hair Portrait #20,” an attention-grabbing panel of 30 portraits of the same woman executed in plastic rhinestones and acrylic.

While the exhibit includes too many works to fully describe, among the many not to be missed are Berlin, Germany, artist Katie Paterson’s “Totality,” a disco ball comprised of every known image of a solar eclipse on view in a small room that sparkles as the ball revolves; Brooklyn artist Tara Donovan’s “Composition (Cards)” series of five mesmerizing patterns on panels created from layered styrene cards, the material commonly used to make ID badges and hotel swipe keys; California artist Nancy Rubins’ large wall sculpture “Drawing,” an actual drawing of graphite pencil on paper; and Ethiopian-born artist Julie Mehretu’s six-panel “Epigraph, Damascus,” in which gestural marks are placed over subtle architectural drawings. The layered piece, according to the catalog, refers to the world’s longest continually inhabited city — and one of many in turmoil in contemporary times.

Aside from the use of black, white, and gray — such concern and consideration of current events and issues are the common denominators of the artists featured in this exhibit.

As Goodson said, these are “women addressing the idea of history.”

And kudos to the Wexner Center for programming exhibits all year long featuring only female artists — so long neglected in art history.

At a glance

“Gray Matters” continues through July 30 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, 1871 N. High St. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Admission: \$8, or free for members, college students and age 18 and younger; free to all from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursdays and the first Sunday of the month. Call 614-292-3535 or visit www.wexarts.org.