THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Reality of My Surroundings: The Contemporary Collection

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THE NASHER MUSEUM OF ART AT DUKE UNIVERSITY
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*I find it distressing, there's never no in-between / we either n****s or kings, we either bitches or queens*

—Mos Def

This winter, Duke's Nasher Museum contributed its two cents to the roiling national conversation on race by celebrating its tenth anniversary with a show of artists of African descent, organized by chief curator Trevor Schoonmaker. The show explores identity and its construction, challenging traditional representations of black subjects in art history and recasting them in a more central role, while honoring the black struggle worldwide. The result is as sightly as is it compelling.

Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007. Chromogenic print, edition 5/5, 56 5/16 × 67 3/8 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.

The Nasher broke ground ten years ago, at a time when Durham was regionally infamous for its crime and gangs. In the mid-aughts, though, a slew of downtown investment kicked off a municipal rebirth, and the Nasher has grown up in concert with the city's revitalized art scene. Durham's turnaround comes with typical caveats—police brutality and gentrification of mostly black areas among them—which bring to mind the 1958 decimation of Durham's thriving black Hayti community to build a freeway. The area has never totally recovered, reminding us of the importance of black voices in any local narrative.

The show opens with Wangechi Mutu's *Family Tree* (2012), a matriarchal diagram of photo collages and a creation myth—cheekily reminding us that, evolutionarily speaking, we are all Africans. The figures are compiled of magazine cutouts of faces, organs from medical tomes, and artifacts of the imaginarium: lemurs, flowers, featherscapes. The images are monstrous, humanity torn by forces of oppression (always felt strongly in Africa and her diaspora), barely holding at the seams. The effect is reminiscent of George Grosz's haunting post-WWI portraits of men made from many pieces stuck inelegantly together, informed by that mass fragmenting of flesh. As a welcome to the exhibition, the piece sets a grim tone.

Nearby hangs Ebony G. Patterson's *shortly after 8 – beyond the bladez* (2014), an acute reminder of the harsh forces at work here, today. A young black man lies prone, eyes closed, in a shining red-and-green landscape scored by gaudy blades of grass. Tragically, the obvious interpretation is that he is a corpse, another in the flood of such images in our time of brutal policing. But the work is redemptive too: he is lying in a red swath, sure, but outside of our current cultural context he might simply be a young man in a field, at the precipice between waking and dream; the landscape comes alive. The title's entendre doubles: beyond the "bladez" of the state, a black man lying down might be more readily interpreted as so tranquil.

Across the room, we see black men inhabiting and breaking archetypal molds: Fahamu Pecou's acrylic on canvas *Nunna my Heros: After Barkley Hendricks' 'Icon for my Man Superman' 1969* (2011) casts the artist as a manly superhero, though his almost plaintive look and the words "AINT NUTHIN BUT A SANDWICH" scrawled across the top lend a tint of irony. Jeff Sonhouse's mixed-media *Decompositing* (2010) shows a nattily dressed black man in a patterned mask looking with hooded eyes at the viewer while a piano and his surroundings fall to pieces. Here the subject is recast as whole, as if hidden, in a world of chaos, in contrast to Mutu's *Family Tree*. The trip-hop music of Steve McQueen's *Girls, Tricky* (2001) thrums through this area of the exhibition and follows a viewer throughout. The work itself is intimate, almost touching, in its raw depiction of music making. But the song's grating repetition is not a welcome sound over to other works.

Barkley L. Hendricks, *Bahsir (Robert Gowens)*, 1975. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 83 1/2 × 66 inches. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Portraiture features heavily throughout, shifting between the black figure as symbol and a more empathetic and quotidian approach. Mickalene Thomas's photograph *Lovely Six Foota* (2007) shows an afroed woman with level gaze, legs seductively ajar, in a floral patterned living room. She is beautiful, but very real. Carrie Mae Weems's poignantly titled *I Looked and Looked to see what so terrified you* (2003) is a black-and-white photographic diptych of a middle-aged woman in quilted dress staring into a hand-mirror, bringing to mind W.E.B. Dubois's idea of double consciousness: "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Rashid Johnson's black-and-white diptych—mirroring Weems's—is entitled *Self-Portrait as the Professor of Astronomy, Miscegenation, and Critical Theory at "The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club" Center for Graduate Studies* (2009). It depicts the artist as dreadlocked, cleanly dressed with glasses and an inscrutable expression, against a tiled backdrop, perhaps commenting on the many labels and preconceptions that (white) societal gaze foists upon a black man who is, after all, not doing much of anything.

The show successfully places the black struggle today, inside America and out, in wider historical context. Hank Willis Thomas's sculpture *If the Leader Only Knew* (2014) is a bronze cast of five pairs of hands holding onto barbed wire, an element cropped from a Holocaust photo and decontextualized, so that it could easily refer to mass incarceration in America.

The result is a visceral ache. Nearby, Christian Boltanski's *Monument Canada* (1988) displays fifteen blurred portraits of children, their faces partially obscured by lamps hanging in front of them, with children's shirts in neat stacks underneath. It gestures obviously to Holocaust memorials, faces forgotten, bulbs snuffed, leaving behind a smattering of artifacts by which we can hardly remember them. Other nearby pieces comment on imperialism, war, and the international system of borders and visas. And we remember that racism is America's original sin—our albatross—but just one facet of the cruelty that has marred humanity from time immemorial.

At times, the show sidesteps identity. Lorna Simpson's photographic *Holding and Breaking* (1992), a triptych, is a comic-strip-esque depiction of a black figure breaking a glass, with the word "an agreement" splashed across the climactic scene. Dario Robleto's *Lamb of Man : Atom and Eve : Americana Materia Medica* (2006 – 2007) imagines garish album covers from record imprints representing various strains of the American psyche. Xaviera Simmons contributes a photographic self-portrait in a bleak North Carolina landscape, *Session One Around the Y* (2010). She shields her face, strews her guitar onto the left side of diverging train tracks, and reminds us of the agony of choice in a benighted world. These works help broaden the scope of the exhibition beyond questions of black artists thinking about blackness to black artists thinking about, well, anything at all.

Still, identity takes central billing. The later portraits in the show move from self-conscious questions of depiction and identity toward more straightforward, self-assured portraiture. Kerry James Marshall's *Portrait of the Artist and a Vacuum* (1981) shows the eponymous appliance standing free, crudely rendered, in an empty room. On a big red wall, a portrait of the artist hangs, racialized as a stupidly smiling, gap-toothed, sable-skinned man. The emptiness of the room hints at the dearth of black subjects in art history, the portrait on the wall at the way they have typically been portrayed. But other painters seem more optimistic: Robert Pruitt, in *Flux* (2011), paints a shorthaired black woman sitting straight-backed and far gazing with a curious group of talismans hanging around her neck: clocks, totems, radios. Time-obsessed, she is both cognizant of the past and looking forward to a great journey. And in the next room, Barkley L. Hendricks, a favorite of the museum, contributes *Bahsir (Robert Gowens)* (1975), casting a sharp-dressed older black man in three thoughtful poses, as the Greek Graces: beauty, charm, and joy. He looks more like wariness, contemplation, equanimity. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *Tambourine* (2010) is an impressionistic portrait of an androgynous black man à la Goya, with white turtleneck and black background. It is a warm portrait, simpatico, gorgeous to behold. Throughout the show, we reckon with identities buffeted by violence, be it from state power or from art-historical trends. These interspersed optimistic notes allow us to remember the beauty amid the struggle.