



Glimpses of Greatness

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Cannibalizing and Interpreting Visual Archives

The timing for “GLYPHS: ACTS OF INSCRIPTION,” an art exhibit presented at Pitzer Art Galleries of Pitzer College, couldn’t be any better. Running through December 5, this multimedia presentation coincides with the 50th anniversary of the death of W.E.B. Du Bois, the respected African American sociologist, activist and scholar.

In order to salute Du Bois' lasting impact upon art and culture, "GLYPHS" is presenting a slideshow projection of *The Paris Albums 1900*, a series of portraits Du Bois originally commissioned for the 1900 Paris World Exposition. When viewing these iconic images again, it's easy to draw a connecting line between what artists were creating within the African American culture in 1900, and what likeminded creative minds are doing today. It's essential to be aware that *The Paris Albums 1900* collection spotlights black culture at the end of the nineteenth century, which was still only thirty-five years after the abolition of slavery, and still a long way away from the civil rights movement. Some of these photographs have a mug shot-like vibe, while others are more theatrical in nature. Du Bois' aim was to try, as best as possible, to showcase a comprehensive, alternative view of the black subject.

In some instances, the more recent pieces in this exhibit force us to look at art – with the arc of art history fully in mind—in entirely new ways. One noteworthy example of this unique approach to reconsidering art—and iconic art, at that—is through Mickalane Thomas' 2010 photograph, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: les trois femmes noires*, which is a creative play on Édouard Manet's 1862-1863 *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Instead of focusing on white, aristocratic males frolicking in nature with equally whiter-than-white females, Thomas has photographed three sassy black females. These aren't just any black females either, but a trio of assertive looking women, outfitted in summer sundresses, slathered with eye shadow and—in two instances—sporting huge afros.

The aforementioned photograph is representative of Thomas' general approach to art, which usually involves inserting black women into iconic Western paintings. Sometimes these women pose nude, and oftentimes—as with this example—they're flanked by 1970s disco era visuals.

Another memorable piece in this exhibit is the documentary film, *Introducing Fae Richards: Excerpts from The Watermelon Woman*, which delves deeply into black and female stereotypes from the 1930s. Filmmaker Cheryl Dunye created this 'mocumentary,' which centers around a Philadelphia video store employee—played by Dunye—who is making a video documentary about a fictional 1930s film actress, Fae Richards, who is only credited on screen with the demeaning name, "the Watermelon Woman." Furthermore, she also only played stereotypical "mammy" roles, the primary parts given to black actors at the time. For this exhibit, Dunye re-cut her film in order to focus more directly on Fae Richards' life. To do so, the film even includes fake archival footage and the photographic Fae Richards Archive to help bring the film's central imaginary historical figure to life. Dunye's work oftentimes revolves around the lives of black lesbians in America. To that end, *Introducing Fae Richards: Excerpts from The Watermelon Woman* includes appearances from well known figures in the lesbian and gay community, such as Camile Paglia, Sarah Schulman and Guin Turner.

Perhaps the most unusual entry in this wide ranging exhibit is Rotimi Fani-Kayode's "Grapes/Nothing to Lose XII," taken from the artist's last collection created with his late partner, Alex Hirst, called *Ecstatic AntiBodies and Bodies of Experience*. "Grapes" from 1989, has the shape of a Rodin sculpture, as we see a man holding out a bunch of grapes. Only this man is half-stone, half flesh, with his face obscured by draped dreadlocks. Tragically, Kayode, born in Nigeria, left the world at the young age of 34. Much like Mickalane, however, Kayode was able to recast religious and art historical iconography in such that the male body acts as a sort of canvas to creatively consider anew the lines between spiritual and erotic fantasy.

With “GLYPHS: ACTS OF INSCRIPTION,” clearly there is a lot of striking imagery to take in. W.E.B Du Bois’s influence and inspiration is served well, with *The Paris Albums 1900*; and the diverse contemporary artistic pursuits sometimes go to great extremes and force eyes and ears to look at the lives of black culture—from both yesterday and today—in entirely new and unusual ways. There are moments during the exhibit where the visual pieces make one wish there were more similar creative pursuits in black music, as well. “GLYPHS: ACTS OF INSCRIPTION,” is an inspiring and sobering reminder of where we have come from, and where we are today.

“GLYPHS: ACTS OF INSCRIPTION” at Pitzer College Art Gallery, Pitzer College, 1050 North Mills Ave., Claremont, (909) 607-3143; www.pitzer.edu/galleries. Hours: Tues-Fri, 12-5PM. Admission is free.