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Los Angeles

- October 29, 2013 Written by [Lenae Day](#)

GLYPHS: Acts of Inscription at Pitzer College Galleries

Three powerful women dressed in patterned sundresses, jewelry, and club-ready makeup are seated on a jumble of printed fabrics, fake flowers, and gold spray-painted fruit. Their pose is a familiar one, mimicking Edouard Manet's scandalous—at the time—*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1862-3), except in this one all posers are clothed, female, black, and staring at me as though they were sussing me up—trying to discern my intention in looking at them and disturbing their plastic picnic. This is Mickalene Thomas' *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: trois femmes noires* (2010) and it is a perfect example of the focus of this show: the dialogue between existing images and the new or supplemental image archives being created by artists.



Mickalene Thomas. *Le dejeuner sur l'herbe: trois femmes noires*, 2010; C-print; artist proof 2/2; 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the Artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Lehmann Maupin, NY and Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

In *GLYPHS: Acts of Inscription*, there are several different ways that the artists interact with the concept of the African Diaspora. Working in photography or video, the artists use images as “acts of inscription,” real or imagined, to change, re-imagine, or fill in the gaps of the “visual archives that constitute history, popular iconographies, and artistic canons.”[1]

The first approach is documentary, to give visibility to a group that isn’t adequately represented in popular culture or art historical canons. An anchoring piece in the show is W.E.B. Du Bois’ original counter archive: *The Paris Albums 1900*, a series of portraits commissioned for his award-winning American Negro Exhibit in the 1900 Paris World Exposition. This was groundbreaking; first and foremost, it was the first time Black Americans were allowed to represent themselves at a world’s fair. A mere generation after emancipation, Du Bois presented graphs, data, and maps showing the history and changes in education, literacy, and patent- and land-ownership along with some 500 photographs depicting the lives and communities of African Americans at the turn of the century. These images were transgressive because they presented a positive image of an emerging black middle class—doctors, lawyers, teachers, and students—images that Du Bois said, “hardly square with conventional American ideas.”[2]



Zanele Muholi, Mbali Zulu, Kwatherna, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010 or Amanda Mapurna, Vredehoek, Cape town from *Faces and Phases*, 2011; silver gelatin print; 20 x 30 inches.
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa.

Du Bois believed in the power of photography as a political tool to institute change. Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series (2006-present) uses photography in a way similar to Du Bois' *Paris Albums*; that is, to create a counter-archive that presents a marginalized group in a new and positive light. Dubbing herself a "Visual Activist," she presents a series of black-and-white portraits of black lesbians in South Africa, highlighting each woman's unique individuality and humanity in order to bring visibility to her community and to help end the violent discrimination directed towards this group in South Africa.



Cheryl Dunye, *Introducing Fae Richards: Excerpts from The Watermelon Woman*, 2013 (film still photograph by Zoe Leonard); video; color; sound; 6:20. Courtesy of the Artist.

A different approach is to use complete fiction in order to create an alternate and more ideal history. The best example of this is Cheryl Dunye's video: *Introducing Fae Richards: Excerpts from The Watermelon Woman* (2013). In her debut feature film, Dunye created a fake documentary about a beautiful black lesbian 1930s film actress, Fae Richards, credited only as "The Watermelon Woman." Originally made in 1997, Dunye produced a directorial recut focusing on the Fae Richards archive for this exhibition. While the concept is strong and the images are believable as a historical archive (they were commissioned from and created by photographer Zoe Leonard), the narration and plot feel dated, while other pieces in the show from before the year 2000 remain fresh.



John Akomfrah, *Peripeteia*, 2012 (film still); HD video; color; sound; 18:12. Courtesy of Carroll/Fletcher and Smoking Dogs Films, London.

British director and artist John Akomfrah also uses fiction, but instead of creating an alternate history, he attempts to fill in the gaps of what we already know. The video *Peripeteia* (2012) begins with two drawings by the sixteenth century German artist Albrecht Dürer, *Head of a Negro Man* (1508) and *Portrait of the Moorish Woman Katharina* (1521), two of the earliest representations of black people in Western art. Everything about these individuals' lives is lost except for these portraits. In *Peripeteia*, Akomfrah imagines their lives outside of Dürer's drawings. One of the most visually stunning works of the show, the characters wander through the misty countryside alone among the ruins. Symbolically, this isolated environment enhances the sense that these people have been lost to European history.



I TOOK A TIP FROM FRIDA
WHO FROM HER BED PAINTED
INCESSANTLY - BEAUTIFULLY
WHILE DIEGO
SCALED THE SCAFFOLDS
TO THE VERY TOP
OF THE WORLD

Carrie Mae Weems, Not Manet's Type, 2010 (detail); series of 5 digital prints; edition of 5, with 2 artist proofs; 40 x 20 inches each. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.

Carrie Mae Weems' five-part series examines her own identity and physicality as a black woman in the context of art history, taking a similar substantive approach as Mickalene Thomas, although an extremely different visual approach. Her series is comprised of five nude or semi-nude self-portraits in a bedroom with text that comments on the absence or objectification of black women's bodies in the history of modern art. In her words, "It was clear, I was not Manet's type, Picasso—who had a way with women—only used me, and Duchamp never even considered me."

GLYPHS allows an underrepresented group in the arts to represent themselves. Each of the artists deals with identity by focusing on the complexities of individuality, which ultimately has a humanizing effect and which emphasizes the dangers of assigning individuals to any one category. In “an art season that could make you think that the feminist movement never happened because we’re looking at almost entirely [white] male monographic shows,” *GLYPHS* is a breath of fresh air.[3]

GLYPHS: Acts of Inscription is on view at the Pitzer College Art Galleries through December 5, 2013 and is curated by Ruti Talmor and Renée Mussai.

[1]From the *GLYPHS* show description: <http://www.pitzer.edu/galleries/>

[2] W.E.B. Du Bois quote from *The American Negro at Paris*: <http://www.webdubois.org/dbANParis.html>

[3] Deborah Solomon, interview on WNYC 93.9 FM radio, September 12, 2013: <http://www.wnyc.org/story/317373-art-talk-whats-hot-fall-art-season-white-men/>

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"No one has ever opened an interview with me expressing gratitude for my existence."
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