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Traces



created space, both subjective and political, for resistance (even though its pervasive social systems often appeared impenetrable to change). Analyses brought together here illuminate racial injustice and violence accepted in both custom and jurisprudence, yet, like Young's study, they gesture toward much more. Both books begin with the premise that past representations of racialization, be it lynching, apartheid, sexual abuse, or state sponsored inequality, offer, decades later, fecund resources to reconsider and reformulate assumptions about what literary intervention is capable of in confronting post-modern racism.

Both texts contend that our impulse to represent still intertwines with aesthetics and political engagement, especially given the rapid transformations in the exercise of power as it reproduces racial hierarchies. These cultural negotiations—from conscious and unconscious everyday performance to civil rights photography; from segregation signs to literary inscription—are rife with embedded knowledge that political communities can access to imagine strategies that might enable change towards a still possible future. These texts and contexts, across diverse methodologies and mediums, expand the African-American cultural archive's rigor beyond ritualistic commemorative forms of memory that entrap the mourner in the past.

But what is this "beyond" the past? What can we reasonably demand from cultural objects—textual, performative, or photographic? Schleitwiler suggests that the creative and political end-point of fashioning representational forms is not transformative action itself; rather, representation offers a beginning whose potentiality coheres in its capacity "to project a call [out to others], seeking to gather and bind a collectivity in the act of response." He reminds us that the task of the author/creator is "to meditate and amplify this call [to others] under conditions that threaten to render it inaudible." Hence, representation is not static: it is transformed, co-opted, altered (if not captured) by seismic technological changes that increase surveillance in the public sphere. Here, we encounter the "inadequacy of

representation" that now "marks the deferral of justice" with a significant difference. And yet, as the best essays from these texts confirm, the work of representation, past and present, entails continuous creative diligence to break free of the shackles—iron or velvet—that the dominant always constructs—to compose a "terribly beautiful music" whose dissonance turns the soul toward what remains humanly possible in contemporary life. Above all, it is the futuristic gaze that distinguishes these books: an insistence that because historical conditions of racialized horror resound in the present, "[r]esponse, and responsibility still awaits."

ART

Curated by Jeff Koons  
**Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis  
 Joannou Collection**

New Museum, New York, March 3–June 20, 2010

*Jenny Florence*

If only Jeff Koons had approached his debut curatorial duties as he does his art. "Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection," the New Museum's spring 2010 offering, could have functioned like his best pieces: over-the-top gestures ripe with meaning, but kept in check by refined execution. After all, aren't the wittiest one-liners by definition the most sparing? Unfortunately, Skin Fruit was more an exercise in aimless abundance than pointed economy and, in the end, the sprawling exhibition amounted to not much more than spoiled opportunity.

Skin Fruit brought together works selected from the collection of Cypriot industrialist and New Museum trustee Dakis Joannou. Officially, the title of the exhibition alludes to man's genesis



and evolution, the sticky humanity of his time on earth and the ritualized yearning for knowledge of the beyond. The title's lewder suggestion—a reference to the slang term “skin flute”—doesn't contradict this take, but nor does it add to it (unless you consider a warning about the number of phallogocentric pieces in the exhibition a useful addition). In choosing so general and universal a subject, Koons offered neophyte gallery-goers easy access to the “strange language” of the works on display, but failed to take a point of view or give any additional insight. What does art do, when not preoccupied with its own navel, but explore the human condition? Despite the lack of focus, *Skin Fruit* had its rewards. It gathered work by some of the last twenty-five years' most significant artists. At its best it operated as a sort of contemporary art primer; at its worst, an ethically precarious and pompous act of namedropping. In either case, the exhibition would have benefitted from a greater sense that its curator had made some decisions along the way.

The selection and organization of works in *Skin Fruit* did little to counter the impression of curation at its most capricious. The exhibition crowded all four floors of the New Museum. It included over one hundred pieces by fifty artists, meaning that in a few instances artists were represented by more than one artwork and, in the case of Roberto Cuoghi, several. Considering how familiar Koons is with Joannou's collection—he inspired its inception and advised many of its acquisitions—this felt more like a lack of decisiveness than a curatorial tactic, especially when an artist was equally represented by fantastic and less successful pieces. For example, Chris Ofili's *Rodin... The Thinker* (1997), a lavish painting executed in the artist's infamous combination of oil, acrylic, resin, glitter and elephant dung, is a natural choice for the exhibition, while the inclusion of his *Blue Damascus* (2004) seems unnecessary. Koons appears to believe that a few less consequential works will add up to something truly significant. Even more perplexing is why the curator would include pieces only to do them the disservice of awkward installation. Why

add Vanessa Beecroft, an artist known for her large-scale performance installations composed of live models, to your checklist and then not only display a video of her work, but tuck it into a cramped corner?

Other pieces were given more respect but were still compromised by the crush of artwork. Canadian David Altjmed's mixed-media *The Giant* (2006), a looming figure at once smug and menacing, though physically vulnerable (his body was fragmented, pierced and overrun by taxidermied squirrels) was a pleasure to inspect, while *The Cave* (2008), a slender mirrored shard reaching from floor to ceiling, asked for contemplation, but was lost in the crowd.

The entire fourth floor of the museum, a space dedicated to large-scale works that communicate the ache and elation inherent in spirituality, ceremony, and nostalgia, was the most thrilling, although here again the pieces could have benefitted from some breathing room. Roberto Cuoghi's *Pazuzu* (2008), a hugely amplified replica of a figure of an Assyrian wind demon (apparently the same that possessed Linda Blair's character in *The Exorcist*) dominated the room and was genuinely intimidating. Terence Koh's *Untitled (Chocolate Mountains)* (2006), composed of twin monoliths rendered in white chocolate, was a taut juxtaposition of the tragic and the comforting; it alluded to the World Trade Center towers but featured soft, powdery surfaces and exuded a warmly sweet smell that permeated the gallery. Koh was one of a number of young artists featured in *Skin Fruit*, along with Tauba Auerbach's *Crumple VI* (2008), which was among the most subtle pieces in the exhibition. While these artists are hardly fledgling, their inclusion in the show offered some respite from the established and ubiquitous contemporary art names that ruled the exhibition.

*Skin Fruit* felt like an indulgent game of show-and-tell that was more about giving an impression of overall wealth than about celebrating individual treasures. Another Cuoghi piece, *Megas Dakis* (2007), a profile portrait of Joannou rendered in wax, recalled imperial Roman coins



in its composition and title. More to the point, it resembled the medals commissioned by the Medicis and declared Joannou the heir to their tradition of artistic patronage. The piece also brought to mind another opportunity that Koons missed in organizing the exhibition: a chance to absolve the collector. The pieces in *Skin Fruit* will likely increase in value as a result of their exposure. A well-curated, perceptive and worthwhile exhibition would have gone a long way to clearing the moral murkiness that surrounded the exhibition from its announcement, rooted in Joannou's position as a New Museum trustee.

In curating *Skin Fruit*, Koons had an advantage that most curators working for public galleries never have: the familiarity with a collection that comes from being intimately involved with its assembly. Considering that the pieces in *Skin Fruit* had successfully passed through two levels of selection, it's even more baffling that Koons would offer such a swollen and aimless exhibition, a disappointing combination of too much pulp and not enough pith.

ART

**Nollywood** by Pieter Hugo  
Yossi Milo Gallery, New York  
February 25-April 17, 2010

*Charlene Lau*

South-African born photographer, Pieter Hugo's recent exhibition *Nollywood* captures the characters of the burgeoning Nigerian film industry. With over 1,000 low-budget, straight to video films per year for a largely domestic market, "Nollywood" is said to be the second largest film industry in the world after Bollywood and it is ahead in numbers but without the reach of the imperial giantess, Hollywood.

Hugo's stark part-fiction, part-documentary photographs are mildly Jeff Wallsian. Staged

yet portraying some kind of truth, the images speak of common Nollywood themes: the macabre and melodramatic, using traditional symbolic imagery and narratives involving romance, extortion, prostitution, witchcraft, or religion. Local actors from the film production centres of Enugu and Asaba in Southern Nigeria worked with Hugo in recreating scenes and characters distinctive to Nollywood films. The seemingly unaltered realities of both cities serve as backdrops: apartment stairwells, junkyards, streets, unappropriated territory. This is Nollywood, an industry unhinged from the cultural conditioning and economic practices of Westernization.

Without this background information, and even despite it, these photographs read as haunting, still, and mystical, with an element of comedic strangeness. Should I laugh, cry, or cower at the subjects' stares? Instant mini-narratives spring from behind each image, immediately arresting and wildly fantastical; these are not unlike uncanny circus sideshow portraits. Carefully composed tableaux hybridize aspects of the old Africa and contemporary experience. In *Gabazzini Zuo*, the actor stands with one foot resting on a bull carcass with its legs tied together and blood pooling under its recently opened neck. Clad in a business suit, he brandishes organs, perhaps those of the former bull slung over his shoulder. It is silently shocking and contemplative, set against an overcast backdrop with large piles of bones in the near distance. *Azuka Adindu* stations the actor in a stereotypical African landscape of trees and a nearly dried out riverbed. Nude and statuesque, he stands proudly, masked only in a Darth Vader headpiece. It is not clear whether or not the helmet carries any of its original meaning in Nigerian film imagery, or if it is simply a mask. Within the photo it seems stripped of association against the background and the extremely unavoidable demonstration of nudity.

The photographs evoke supernatural otherworldliness that is anachronistically set in the nostalgia of the turn of the twentieth century. They hark back to a cinematic old-timeyness: makeup, masks, props recalling the Golden Age