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At the Studio Museum in Harlem, 4 Shows Engage a Cultural Conversation

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER JAN. 7, 2016

For nearly five decades, the Studio Museum in Harlem has served as a cultural repository, reflecting the ruptures, shifts and spectrum of experiences for artists of African descent. Its current grouping of shows, culled mostly from the museum's permanent collection, echoes this landscape, looking backward and forward. The main exhibition, "A Constellation," includes the work of 26 artists and focuses on themes of abstraction, the figure and the history of the African diaspora. "Black: Color, Material, Concept" continues the conversation around blackness initiated by Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the museum, who introduced the term "post-black" into the cultural conversation almost 15 years ago with the exhibition "Freestyle." In the basement, a sculptural installation by Marc Andre Robinson weaves together formalism with black cultural history, while another, "Lorraine O'Grady: Art Is ..." offers a fantastic exhibition of photographs documenting Ms. Grady's performance piece during the 1983 African-American Day Parade, in which she skillfully weaves together art, activism and participation.

Two of the first works in "A Constellation," organized by Amanda Hunt, an assistant curator at the Studio Museum, are a geometrically abstract painting by Al Loving, "Variations on a Six-Sided Object" (1967), and a figurative sculpture, "Mother and Child" (1993), by Elizabeth Catlett. These

two poles of 20th-century American art — abstraction and figuration — also signify the African-American perspective on the movements, as articulated by these two revered (now deceased) artists. They raise questions like, Is there such a thing as black abstraction? (An issue also addressed in an exhibition of Stanley Whitney’s paintings at the Studio Museum last year and in an Alma Thomas retrospective opening at the Tang Museum upstate next month.) They also ask, What does it mean in art to represent bodies that have been marked as property and by racist violence?

Throughout “A Constellation,” you see reverberations and responses to these questions by younger and living artists. Torkwase Dyson’s abstract wall painting “Strange Fruit (Dignity in Hand)” (2015) brings the question of violence and the black body to the forefront in a title inspired by one of Billie Holiday’s signature songs, which describes the “strange fruit” of lynching victims hung from trees (“blood on the leaves and blood at the root”). Similarly, the sculptor Melvin Edwards is represented by an abstract welded-steel sculpture, “Working Thought” (1985), from the “Lynch Fragment” series. Throughout his career, Mr. Edwards has made elegant formal connections with twisted metal — the steel of the automotive industry and other arenas of American industrial power — inviting comparisons with the twisting of bodies oppressed or broken under the same system.

But the connection to the exploited and violated black body is made even more explicit in Nona Faustine’s “From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth” (2013), in which Ms. Faustine photographed herself nude and standing on a crate at the intersection of Water and Wall Streets in Manhattan, the site of a slave market in earlier centuries. Aaron Fowler’s wonderful “Family” (2015), an assemblage that uses materials from paint to Frosted Flakes breakfast cereal and a bamboo earring, depicts the artist leading his family “to the promised land” (according to a gallery handout) but also refers to the ruptures of the black family under slavery, recently addressed by Ta-Nehisi Coates in an essay in *The Atlantic*, “The Black Family

in the Age of Mass Incarceration.”

Other works play with abstraction and figuration in inventive ways. Tschabalala Self's painting “Bodega Run” (2015) merges the two in a large head that harks back to African tribal art and resembles a colorful version of a Romare Bearden collage. (Mr. Bearden, who helped form Spiral, a midcentury group of African-American artists, looked to Picasso, who he felt honored and validated African art rather than merely using it for his own artistic ends.) Meanwhile, Sondra Perry's video “Double, Quadruple, Etcetera, Etcetera I” (2013) is an intense, manic image of a dancing figure whose body has been digitally erased, so that only a whirling mass, with black hair, remains. The political nature of black hair has been addressed by observers from Malcolm X to Chris Rock, in his 2009 documentary, “Good Hair,” but Ms. Perry's work also suggests the vibrancy of spirit worlds, African dervishes and the lingering ghosts of history.

In “Black: Color, Material, Concept,” the palette is reduced, mostly to black and white, but the ideas are rich and diverse. Kameelah Janan Rasheed's woodblock print “Punctuated Blackness” (2013) repeats the word “black” followed by various punctuation marks, to show how a colon, question mark or exclamation point invokes rational analysis or outrage. Rudy Shepherd's serigraph print “Blacula” (2009) pays homage to the eponymous 1972 blaxploitation film imagining Dracula as an African prince, while Leonardo Drew's “Number 175” (2015), a beautiful wooden construction painted black, is reminiscent of Louise Nevelson's sculptures but also injects — within this context — race into the conversation. (“Black” also includes minor works by luminaries like Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon and Jack Whitten.)

Marc Andre Robinson, a former Studio Museum artist-in-residence, makes excellent use of reclaimed wood in a basement installation. His sculpture “Twice Told” (2015), suspended from the ceiling, uses chair legs glued together to create a dynamic parallel-line-drawing in space. The title

comes from the classic 1903 book “The Souls of Black Folk” by W. E. B. DuBois, who wrote that “one ever feels his two-ness: an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.” Mr. Robinson’s work is a somewhat literal interpretation, but impressive nonetheless.

If the responsibility and strain of being an African-American artist is apparent throughout, this burden is worn lightly in Lorraine O’Grady’s “Art Is ...” (1983). During the September 1983 African-American Day Parade in Harlem, Ms. O’Grady designed a float and rode up Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard with a group of collaborators dressed in white. They jumped off periodically to hold up gilded picture frames in which spectators could pose with their friends and be photographed by Ms. O’Grady.

The resulting images, installed in a row marching around the gallery walls, are sweet, funny and touching. Politics peeks through, at moments: a photograph of a white police officer watching the proceedings; an advertisement for Colt 45 Malt Liquor, which targeted low-income African-American neighborhoods. Looking at the photographs conjures welcome sensations, however, that are often absent in the recent discourse on race: pride, joy and hope. No wonder Ms. O’Grady’s exhibition has been extended; it is worth visiting the museum for this show alone.

“A Constellation,” “Black: Color, Material, Concept,” “Lorraine O’Grady: Art Is ...” and “Marc Andre Robinson: Twice Told” continue through March 6 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; 212-864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

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