

Eye Contact: Reclaimed Connects and Confronts at Ruby City's Studio

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A powerfully dark female spirit sweeps through *Reclaimed*, the new group exhibition at Studio (formerly SPACE) at Ruby City, operated by the Linda Pace Foundation.

At the physical center of the 10-artist, all-female show stands *Dix-Huit+*, by Dutch artist Lara Schnitger, a looming figural sculpture consisting of an interior armature of wooden dowels, draped with a dress-like array of black-and-white mesh fabrics akin to lingerie. The “dress” bears a banner of text, which winds around the figure several times. To read the statement, Schnitger leads you around and around *Dix-Huit+*, kineticizing the figure. From the viewer’s changing point of view, the figure doesn’t gyrate so much as writhe.

I won’t recite the statement here. It starts as a come-on, but as you circle it reading, it recalls the more baldly directive keywords of a YouPorn search.

Unlike some male artists who work in porn – think Jeff Koons’ *Made in Heaven* or Nobuyoshi Araki’s bondage photos – Schnitger’s sculpture, the title of which translates as “18,” forgoes a cheeky transgressive wink to confront us with the inescapable vernacular of everyday dirty words. Spicy, if commonplace, descriptions and acts are relayed as usual, but liberated from context they hint at a banal violence, a casual misogyny. *Dix-huit+* can be read as “about” sexuality – but whose, and at whose expense?

A kindred spirit of frank questioning unifies the 10 female artists in *Reclaimed* into a sisterhood. In the words of the show’s official narrative, “[*Reclaimed*] embraces the themes of nature, the body, and diversity. The conversation is clear, women are reclaiming their bodies, people are denouncing being colorblind, and reclaiming their race.”

The conversation is clear, with clear commonalities and parameters, but it’s no less ambiguous for all that. The curation by Kelly O’Connor and Kathryn Kanjo of work in the Linda Pace Foundation permanent collection is unapologetically race-, size-, and generation-diverse. The palette is largely black and white. With a couple of exceptions, the compositions are formal. As in Schnitger’s work, though, the issues may be obvious, especially in the current cultural moment, but the questions are what stick with you. The map is not the territory.

Lorraine O’Grady reclaims her own body as her territory in her video *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, which plays birdsong and courses over the shining thicket of her hair, making her intimate details both earthen and cosmic, decommodifies and asserts her blackness. In the photomontage print *Fir-Palm*, she plants an impossible hybrid tree, a juxtaposition of tropical and conifer elements, in a dark contour of female skin. O’Grady is a Boston-born daughter of Jamaican-immigrant parents, but you don’t need to know this to recognize the places she takes you to.

Laura Aguilar’s *Stillness* photo series plants her nude body in a clearing framed by live oaks. As with several of the other artists, Aguilar made the series as an Artpace resident. Depending on which way you read the series, her body either emerges from or descends into the earth, making the dirt both womb and grave. This

series may make people uncomfortable. Aguilar possesses what writer Roxane Gay calls “the unruly body:” large, rooted, occupying space, neither nubile nor hairless nor devoid of individual meaning. She is the most naked of naked, rooted, not arrayed in invitation. In the words of O’Connor, who allowed me to preview the show after install, “She’s not making some feminine *contrapposto* pose.”

A depiction of the female body made by a female artist is more than a self-portrait – it’s a confrontation. Consider two other works of photography, Kiki Smith’s “Las Animas” and Judy Dater’s “Twinka” series. Smith squats, grimaces, and (gasp!) displays underarm hair. She is both evoking the wild banshee, and being her. Her sister might be Dater’s dark silhouette outlined in a foggy night, or even scarier, her nymph-like woman in a gossamer gown, staring you down hard, allowing you to gaze, but unwilling to let you off the hook.

There’s a sly witchiness to *Reclaimed*, which may turn on, or scare off, depending on the viewer. Bare silver arms by Northern Irish Dorothy Cross direct something unseen, while Robyn O’Neil’s *Fallen* owl seems ... familiar. Annette Messenger’s installation of small, framed photos of male and female parts photos caught in sinuous (and maybe sinister?) netting, and feels like a material invocation. Even small-scale wall works, like the seven sketchbook glimpses by Tracey Rose, pulse with subversive vibes.

It’s possible that at the exhibition’s opening Friday’s opening, some attendees may find themselves unsettled by these voices, drawn outside instead to enjoy cocktails and music in the gentle spring air. But for those of us willing to risk exposure, the dark and pointy glories of *Reclaimed* feel like a long-overdue reckoning.