

Reviewing the View

A review of the exhibition: *Embodied: Black Identities in American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery* February 18, 2011 to June 26

By Geoffrey Detrani

The exhibition *Embodied: Black Identities in American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery*, draws together 50 stylistically various artworks from the Yale University collection and places them within the context of an overarching, if loosely developed, theme. All of the artists included, but one, are African-American or afro-North American.

This is the sort of exhibition where the organizing principle – the framework that guided the selection of work – is critical. From the exhibition literature we learn that the shows curators want to prompt an examination of the very notions of “black” or African-American” art. They wish to ask: is there such a thing as black art, and if so is it recognizable by its outward effects?

But there is a bit of begging the question here. By assembling these stylistically and temporally and conceptually disparate works by a number of artists under one roof, so to speak, they’ve answered their own premise in the affirmative.

The wall text for some of the artists (conceptual artist Adrian Piper, abstract painter Felrath Hines) intimates this problem by acknowledging the artists’ rejection of a “black artist” grouping.

So the show rests on a shaky conceptual foundation. How is the art?

Among the best works in the show are a remarkable suite of prints by contemporary artist Kara Walker. Walker - who is known for her work with cut paper silhouetted vignettes that envision scenes from the catastrophic black experience of the antebellum south- here shows consistently themed explorations crafted as deftly executed prints. Using imagery of lynching and cotton, of forfeited childhoods and exaggerated sexuality, Walker evokes the tenor of a brutal historical era.

These prints are very strong and reminiscent of the great 18th century Spanish artist Francisco Goya’s “disasters of war” series. Goya, who lived to see Napoleon’s military campaign in Spain, documented for posterity the tragedy of the way war was visited upon the common people (what we today would call non-combatants). Of course, the violence of war and the violence of slavery are kin.

Also of note are the prints and color sketches of John Woodrow Wilson whose poignant works evoke cultural memories of oppression and economic injustice and are

strongly crafted in a social-realist style reminiscent of Thomas Heart Benton and similar artists of the 1930's and 40's.

Embodied: Black Identities in American Art is divided into three conceptual sections, each anchored by a significant piece.

The first section, "The Absent Body," focuses on the absence of representation of black figures in art and its key work is "Wigs (portfolio)" by Lorna Simpson. Simpson juxtaposes images of wigs – no heads go with them – printed on felt, with text that draws an explicit connection between the body and objectification (through labor/slavery, through ideas of beauty, etc.).

There is a fair amount of abstraction in this section as well. Most notable are Martin Puryear's woodcuts of abstract figuration and Julie Mehretu swirling, dynamic etching *Circulation*.

The second section, "Embodiment of Art and Artifice," concerns the tropes and personas that reveal or conceal back identity through art. The key work for this section is Kerry James Marshal's impressive, untitled painting that is featured in the show's press material. In this work a black female figure, an artist, adorned in what looks like an abstract expressionist tunic, sits stalwartly with brush and painters palette in hand. She's posed in front of a paint-by-numbers schemed canvas and stares resolutely, expressionlessly at the viewer. Marshal's painting has an unnerving effect. It suggests the painter in the picture is constrained in her options, uncomfortably positioned to fill out the contours of a prescribed cultural text.

The final section is "Displaced Embodiment," and the central painting here is *Afro-Parisian Brothers*, by Barkley Hendricks. Here we see two, nattily dressed black men of the 1970's (afro's, bell bottom's and all) set, it seems, for a well-dressed adventure. Hendricks deploys ample skill in depicting forms and facial expressions– but his real trick is in placing these figured against a flat, monochromatic background. This causes us to consider these two out of any surrounding physical context and into a wider conceptual context, perhaps that of the wider African diaspora.

And this larger context is the real subject of this exhibition. *Embodied: Black Identities in American Art* does not arrive at an answer to its questions. But those questions, being clearly rhetorical, cannot have a definitive conclusion. What we have is an opportunity to see some strong artwork that, together, denies the rigidity of fixed identities and predetermined categories.