

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Frieze

Todd Gray Visualizes the Labyrinth of Black Post-Colonial Identity

The artist's montages, at David Lewis, New York, are elegant but cryptic reflections on belonging and complicity

Reviews/ Mitch Speed September 2019 print issue



It sometimes seems there must be ligatures joining people to places, and places to histories. Of course, through their very DNA, people are connected to multiple places – not to mention the cat's cradle of histories that run through them. Hence the difficulty of knowing exactly where – in terms of our language, our cultural habits, etc. – we come from. Todd Gray's new exhibition, 'Cartesian Gris Gris', gives cryptic reflection to this labyrinthine structure of belonging, with a mind to the relationship between Blackness and colonial Europe. His medium is a kind of structuralism, combining *mise-en-abîme* pictorialism with glancing montage transpositions.

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Todd Gray, *Cartesian Gris Gris (Water)*, 2019, two archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 149.2 × 167.6 × 7.6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

There is a honed elegance to the works on display here that often outstrips the show's profound and difficult implications. In nine assemblages, framed photographs of lush landscapes – at times crafted into pristine imperial sculpture, at others left pristinely untouched – are stacked upon and hung next to images of architecture, sculpture and people. The frames are confined to a tightly controlled aesthetic range: regal walnut to gold faux-baroque. As much as echoing the architectural pomp often contained in their imagery, these pictures cast viewership itself as a conspiracy of immanence and simulacrum; a theatre of intercultural and interhistorical spectatorship.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Excepting one black and white photograph of Coretta Scott King – held within another darkly framed image and, therein, between an unnamed person's slender fingers – this show betrays no identifiable personalities. The image in which the self-effacing civil-rights icon appears is aptly titled *Coretta* (all works 2019). Behind her is a larger photograph of some neo-classical folly. Despite being intact, the structure seems a depressive ruin. This retuning of the image's resonance results from a deft collaboration between Scott King's expressive glance and Gray's montage technique. At times, the method is almost too knowing: while the artist's thematic and critical intentions are beyond warranted, the occasional unexpected turn of technique and imagery would allow this show to feel uncanny and alive. Aside from a large hanging vellum work, mimicking the architecture of Gray's Ghana studio and drawn upon with a quickly looping charcoal pattern, (*gris-gris*), this show feels like a single piece reworked nine times over in slightly varied form.



Todd Gray, *Onesimo / Leopold*, 2019, three archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 99.7 × 142.2 × 7.6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

In *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)*, an unfinished building fronted by classical-looking columns forms the upper half of a vertical diptych. The lower image is inverted, causing a park of manicured trees to appear as so many verdant

Meliksetian MB Briggs

stalactites. Two stacked, oval-framed photos coolly bridge these grand historical themes with closer human consequence. In the largest oval, a sharply dressed man sits in an elegant easy chair, a single visible hand indexing his blackness. Blocking his face and torso, the smaller picture shows a packed bookshelf. Considering Gray's own work in Africa and his critical interest in Frantz Fanon's theory of the colonization of the mind – from *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) – the image becomes an allegory of how the printed codex, even while it is a profound human creation, is also complicit in colonial violence, via the erasure of oral histories.



Todd Gray, *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)*, 2019, four archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 168.6 × 139.1 × 12.7 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Gray's oval-over-figure technique was here thrice reprised. In *Akwidaa | Luxembourg* (which hung in the gallery's office space and was not an official part of the exhibition), the faces of two embracing women are occluded by a photograph of mythic statuary. The blocking image shows an unnamed stone goddess, her arms broken off, rhyming those of Gray's living subjects, which are severed by the image's border. Thankfully, one hand remains free, tenderly holding the composition's centre, which is to say its power. Such moments of subtle discord inject Gray's otherwise highly controlled method with an element of diffuse magic.

'Cartesian Gris Gris' ran at David Lewis, New York, from 30 April to 30 June 2019.

Main image: Todd Gray, (gris-gris), 2019, charcoal on vellum, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

MITCH SPEED

Mitch Speed is a writer based in Berlin, Germany.

First published in Issue 205
September 2019