“Insertion”: Self and Other

The exhibition focuses on four contemporary African artists who use their image in the execution of their work, or inscribe their own bodies into its final configuration. Concerned as installation works and influenced by ideas of performance art, the works of these artists have primarily been motivated by the quest for self-representation, or negotiation of self-identity. Because these artists live and practice between less or more cultures, their works often investigate the interactions of autobiography, self and the other. Like other contemporary non-Western artists active in the West, these artists address the objectification of the non-white body and question its imaginarily mapping in Western culture.

The term “insertion” embraces all the multiple layers of meaning inherent in this word, sexual or otherwise. It refers to the complex manner in which these artists “inscribe” images of their bodies into their work. In the Western imagination, non-Western bodies are often objectified, sterilized and penned in a mixture of fear and desire. Hence, inserting one’s self or body into the work may also be an act of counter-generational, an assertion of one’s own subjectivity in response to objectification. Insertion can also be used to assert one’s presence in the face of presumed absence. In some cases, insertion is also a strategy to signify that racial and cultural differences in Western society—or “otherwise”–are inscribed on the non-white body.

In the work of these artists, the silhouette of the person portrayed (in this case visually reversed) functions as a surrogate presence rather than a physical likeness, allowing the artist’s body-image to transcode the conventional boundaries of version/khade, i.e. objective or literal likeness. Hence, self-portraiture becomes a form of self-representation determined by terms formulated by others, or knowingly based on their expectations.

This exhibition introduces four artists whose work embodies the notion of insertion as self-portraiture. Hassan Musa, Olu Oguibe, Berni Searle, and Zinb Sedira. These four artists share a number of common traits, among them a strong affinity to postmodernism, and the language and techniques of contemporary global art. In fact, their work can only be understood within the parameters of such discourse and practices. Also, like all artists engaged in non-object-oriented form of production, these artists display a strong affinity to photography, in its artistics and documentary uses. And finally, all four of these artists create installation art as a means of creating significant sites in which various aspects of the self (imaginary, emergent, or residual) can be explored.

In Africa and the African Diaspora, the intersection of race and gender is perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the art created by contemporary artists. It is this intersection which provides the inevitable determinants of the individual perspective, and which informs the powerful images on display in this exhibition.

ZINB SEDIRA: BEHIND THE VEIL

The art of Zinb Sedira is clearly autobiographical, yet not without universal appeal. Born in 1963 to Algerian immigrants, the London-based artist was brought up in the suburbs of Paris following the Algerian liberation from France. The events of this turbulent period and the resulting animosity towards the Algerian community have been a driving force throughout Sedira’s work. Sedira’s Self Portrait I, (1999) is about the veil and the Muslim female gaze. The veil here serves as a metaphor for “a veiling the mind” whether through censorship or self-censorship; its absence represents a willingness to face akram/as to negotiate the multiple layers of one’s consciousness. The eyes in Self Portrait I are sympathetic and powerful rather than complaisant. The physical veil in the photography has been gently effaced to emphasize the eyes, and to let the body merge into the background, like the wall of the whitewashed house that become another metaphor for the veil. By escaping their mask, they subvert the role of the veiled woman. “Open to be gazed at, it is also the part that is free to look, to think without being judged, silent sight, silent witness... to see but not to be seen.”

In Made in England Miss Nasnah, 1999, Sedira transposes the traditional codes of dress among North African Muslim women to explore issues of cultural memory, sexuality and nationalism. As in earlier works, Sedira uses Islamic geometric designs to reclaim a traditionally masculinist art form. By covering the 1960’s Alberto-style high heels, with Islamic Arabeques, Sedira re-territorializes the feminine, and “inscribes” it into a masculine form. As a fetishised form, the high-heel may signal subordination, while emphasizing erotic allure. The repetition of Islamic patterning provides Sedira with a means of continually re-positioning herself, her cultures, as “it plays with clear and unself-conscious, between exotic and appearances.”

Don’t do to her what you did to me (1998), is a video installation which explores the tradition of Islamic healing charms, using a mixed media of ink, water, and passport photographs of a woman’s face. The title of the work comes from a phrase uttered by a woman on the verge of death, used to excommunicate the conflicts between Western and Muslim cultures. Mothers often use it to protect their young girls from becoming “too French,” rather than good Muslims.

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The art of Zineb Sedira draws our attention to the problematic of cultural appropriation and questions our understanding of fixed categories of race, class and gender which it left behind. As Searle himself notes: One of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid has been that he is in or has been experienced, more often than not, as a site of conflict. The testimonies that have emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission clearly demonstrate this point. [...] Working with images of the self offers a necessary and important stage in the deconstruction of cultural and gender identity.

Searle’s mixed media Color Me, is an autobiographical installation that both celebrates the rich and overlapping strands of the artist’s heritage, and refuses to be bound by it. Color Me features a series of enlarged photographs of the artist’s naked body smeared with spots of various shades of red, yellow, white and brown in a way that resembles any definition of identity that is static, or delineated into neat categories. In several photographs, the artist (s) directly addresses the viewer — a confrontational move that challenges the viewer’s position in terms of the “exotic space.” Searle’s unique use of space references the Western space trade in the Cape Dutch colony in the 17th century, as well as her mixed heritage. However, there is also the uncomfortable suggestion that the spots have the ability to smother or suffocate the viewer.

In a Dark Shade of Light, Searle continues to explore the processes and issues in her earlier work, focusing on the body as a site on which various processes are inscribed and mapped. In a series of Polaroids, Searle shows the most sensitive parts of her body (stained with Egyptian hieroglyphics). In the images, the darker marks left by the process of staining recall bruises and hints of trauma, while the light boxes on which the photographs are displayed evoke forensic investigative techniques. By darkening her body and imitating scrutiny, Searle interrogates and challenges the racial hierarchy of color constructed by the Apartheid system.

OLU OJUDE: SURROGATE PRESENCE

The central image in Olu Ojude’s installation (Brothers #, 2000), is a double-exposed photograph of a child whose anonymous presence and innocent gaze demand reflection and silent contemplation. Although the photograph depicts the artist himself as a child, it primarily functions as a surrogate presence for Ojude’s younger brother who died more than twenty years ago. (Brothers # continues the work begun in Buggy (Memorial for an Unknown Child), 1997 in which Ojude’s image serves as a surrogate image for his brother). However, in Brothers # the artist’s image represents both his own and his brother’s image.

Ojude’s work evokes the unique photographic traditions of surrogate representation, as practiced in certain African societies. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the tradition provides the living twin with a false image or effigy of the dead twin, thus anchoring his spirit in the world of the living. Since Ojude and his brother were not twins, this work extends the tradition beyond its original context.

In The Origin of Art, 1998, a complex work that references Western art history, Musk attaches the head of Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa to Coustel’s most controversial and transgressive work, The Origin of the World, 1866. By juxtaposing these popular and diametrically opposed masterpieces of Western art, Musk creates a powerful critique of capitalist culture, its construction of the female body, and the course of Western art history as a whole.

Musa’s large paintings are usually executed in textiles ink on printed cloth, creatively blending the designs of the fabric with his own painting. Through this he inserts his own presence in a manner that draws attention to the endless possibilities of any art work, and to art practices outside of Western-sanctioned aesthetics.

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