

Berni Searle
Hassan Musa
Zineb Sedira
Olu Oguibe

Curated by
Salah M. Hassan

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Cover: Zineb Sedira *Self Portrait 1, 1999* from series of four
life size photographs

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"Insertion": Self and Other

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This 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. Conceived 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 two or more cultures, their works often investigate the intersections of autobiography, self and the other. Like other contemporary non-white artists active in the West, these artists address the objectification of the non-white body and question its imaging/imaging 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 "insert" images of their bodies into their work. In the Western imagination, non-Western bodies are often objectified, exoticized and viewed with a mixture of fear and desire. Hence, inserting one's self or body into the work may also be an act of counter-penetration, 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 "otherness"—are inscribed on the non-white body.

In the work of these artists, the *simulacrum* of the person portrayed (in this case willfully inserted) functions as a *surrogate presence* rather than a physical likeness, allowing the artist's body-image to transcend the conventional boundaries of *verisimilitude*, 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 Zineb Sedira. These four artists share a number of common traits, among them a strong affinity to post-modernism, 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 both its artistic 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.

ZINEB SEDIRA: BEHIND THE VEIL

The art of Zineb Sedira is clearly autobiographical, but 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 1*, (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 dilemmas and to negotiate the multiple layers of one's consciousness. The eyes in *Self Portrait 1* are voyeuristic and powerful rather than compliant. The physical veil in the photographs has been gently effaced to emphasize the eyes, and to let the body merge into the background, like the walls of the whitewashed houses 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 be seen."

In *Made in England: Miss Holmes*, 1999, Sedira transgresses the traditional codes of dress among North African Muslim women to explore issues of cultural memory, sexuality and nostalgia. As in earlier works, Sedira uses Islamic geometric designs to re-claim a traditionally masculine art form. By covering the 1960s' stiletto-style high heels, with Islamic Arabesques, Sedira re-territorializes the feminine, and "inserts" it into a masculine form. As a fetishized form, the high heels 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 unclear, between existing and disappearing."

Don't do to her what you did to me I (1998), is a video installation which reinterprets 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 exorcise the conflicts between Western and Muslim cultures. Mothers often use it to protect their young girls from becoming "too French," rather than good Muslims.

The art of Zineb Sedira draws our attention to the problematics of cultural appropriation and questions our understanding of fixed categories of East/West, and our perception of gender and sexuality in Muslim societies. It questions our ability to sustain a permanent position either "inside" or "outside" of a place, a culture or a memory.

BERNI SEARLE: COLOR MATTERS

As a South African of native African and German/English descent, Berni Searle was categorized as "colored" during the Apartheid era—a fact which drives much of her work today. Searle's art explores the struggle between the individual and the community, and the formation of identity. Here, as in most of her installa-



Berni Searle detail from the *Color Me* series 1998, mixed media installation, photographs

tions, Searle attempts to excavate the neglected history of South African women as a means of recovering from European colonialism and the problematics of race, class and gender which it left behind. As Searle herself notes:

One of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid has been that he self is or has been experienced, more often than not, as a site of conflict. The testimonies that have emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission glaringly demonstrate this point. [...] Working with images of the self offers a necessary and important stage in the deconstruction of cultural and gendered identity.

Searle's mixed media *Color Me*, is an autobiographical installation series 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 pho-

tographs of the artist's naked body smeared with spices of various shades of red, yellow, white and brown in a way that resists any definition of identity that is static, or delineated into neat categories. In several photographs, the artist gazes directly at the viewer – a confrontational gesture that challenges the viewer's position in terms of the 'exotic gaze.' Searle's unique use of spice references the thriving spice 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 spices have the ability to smother or suffocate.

In *A Darker 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 henna. 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 inviting scrutiny, Searle interrogates and challenges the racial hierarchy of color constructed by the Apartheid system.

OLU OGUIBE: SURROGATE PRESENCE

The central image in Olu Ogube's installation *Brothers II*, 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 Ogube's younger brother who died more than twenty years ago. *Brothers II* continues the work begun in *Buggy (Memorial to an Unknown Child)*, 1997 in which Ogube's image serves as a surrogate image for his brother. However, in *Brothers II* the artist's image represents both his own, and his brother's image.

Ogube's work evokes the unique photographic tradition of surrogate representation, as practiced in certain African societies. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the tradition provides the living twin with a *faux* image or

effigy of the dead twin, thus anchoring his spirit in the world of the living. Since Ogube and his brother were not twins, this work extends the tradition beyond its original parameters, and



Olu Ogube *Brothers II*, 2000, Installation, photographs

focuses on memory rather than metapsychology. Though *Brothers II* is certainly autobiographical, its universal appeal is clear. The child in *Buggy* or *Brothers II* is every mother's child. Both evoke the lingering presence of the beloved dead and affirm the transition from grief to celebration, an experience all humans can share. As Ogube himself has eloquently noted:

[D]espite the alienation and segregation and desensitization that have today become prevailing parameters of our lives, there is a corner deep inside all of us where we are still able to connect, and to share in one and other's moments of rapture and distress.

Indeed, such universal humanistic concerns are recurring themes in all the facets of work created by this Nigerian-born and New York-based artist, whose interests range from poetry to art criticism, and has himself curated a number of groundbreaking exhibitions.

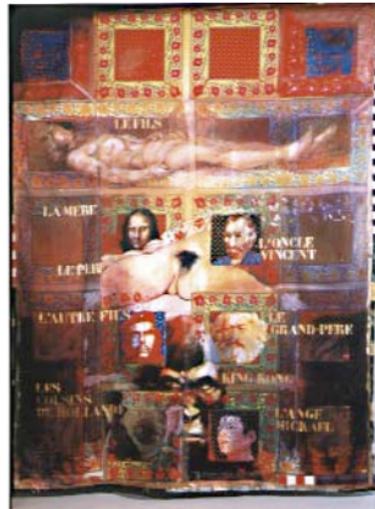
HASSAN MUSA: GRAPHIC CEREMONIES

The critical appropriation of classical Western masterpieces is an ongoing theme in the art of Hassan Musa, a Sudanese-born now living in France. In *Self Portrait as Saint Sebastian*, 1999, *Saint Sebastian of the Sunflower*, 1999, and *Family Album*, 1998, Musa takes on the martyrdom of San Sebastian, a central theme in Renaissance art, and processes it into a surrogate image that criticizes the hegemonic presence of Western culture. The ambiguity associated with the images of Saint Sebastian—commonly depicted as a handsome youth pierced by arrows—allows the artist to replace him with such latter-day icons as Che Guevara and Van Gogh, whose lives evoke complex reactions of guilt and blame no less powerful than those created by Saint Sebastian's act of martyrdom.

In *The Origin of Art*, 1998, a complex work that references Western art history, Musa attaches the head of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to Courbet's most controversial and transgressive work, *The Origin of the World*, 1866. By juxtaposing these popular but diametrically opposed masterpieces of Western art, Musa creates a powerful criticism 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 textile 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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Hassan Musa *Family Album* 1998 Textile ink on cloth