

## ART LIES

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L. Wura Natasha-Ogunji, *The Return*, 2007; video still; courtesy of the artist



R. (l to r) Bessie Harvey, *Horse and Rider*, 1986; wood and various items; collection of Selig D. Sacks; Lonnie Holley, *Lines of Communication*, c. 1992; phone, toy gun, wires, rocks, foam, bicycle chain; collection of Selig D. Sacks

## NEW YORK

### Négritude

#### Exit Art

“This Négritude you speak of,” Greg Tate writes, “a cause of such despair and delight.” Indeed, you could practically hear smacking teeth, stomping feet, clapping hands and shaking heads in Exit Art’s latest curatorial experiment, *Négritude*.

The show had little direct connection to the literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s of the same name, a collaboration of black poets and political thinkers from the Franco-phone colonies of West Africa and the Caribbean. Instead, through a keen sense of shared history and perhaps a bit of indulgence in what Rose Myriam-Réjouis calls “dark play,” Exit Art founder Papo Colo, Tânia Cypriano, Réjouis, Franklin Sirmans and Tate forced Pan-African expressions of pride into a potent brew.

Does the historical concept of Négritude possess the theoretical flexibility that the curators pretend that it does? Perhaps not. But, as physical migration becomes more accessible than ever and national myths correspondingly more arbitrary, Négritude offers a fresh, useful evocation of the blurry distinction between sentimentality and material history, and the strategy underlying its cultural politics feels entirely relevant to the twenty-first century. Négritude delivers a welcome alternative to the tendency in New York City’s commercial art market to isolate the glossy production of black North Americans from the work of Caribbean and South American artists of African descent. The curators of this exhibition join a growing movement of artists and thinkers whose unease regarding the commodification of black American cultural expression, embrace Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” model of diasporic cultural exchange, and boredom with the same old same old has led them to challenge the global cultural hegemony of American wealth by expanding the expressive field.

And what an expanse it is! Each curator organized a section of Exit Art’s cavernous gallery, and the selections are distinct enough to suggest five different exhibitions.

The room is crowded; its heterogeneity impossible to reduce. At its best, *Négritude* is a hot mess that reflects the stickiest questions faced by curators and artists of color today: Who is my audience? How does my work relate to vernacular forms? What are my obligations to history? Do I critically interpret Zora, Franz, Chakha, Lauryn, Langston, Léopold - or do I emulate them?

It is Tate who offers the richest response, a ballsy call to arms guided by his catalogue text: “You could get stuck either on the Negrocity or the ‘tude factor in the word Négritude, but it’s not a word or a concept divisible or reducible to the sum of its parts.” His section is equally defiant, hovering somewhere between a Butch Morris concert, my pastor’s living room, an archaeological dig and a college syllabus. It’s not always clear which of the things on the ground and stapled to the wall constitute artworks: unlabeled objects complicate the relationship between sculpture, performance detritus, fetish object and conversation piece. Further mixing things up, “post-studio” artists like Xaviera Simmons and Arthur Jafa are shown alongside self-taught painters and sculptors Thornton Dial, Sr., Thornton Dial, Jr. and Lonnie Holley.

Simmons’ large sculptures are among *Négritude*’s most striking works. One piece suspends from the ceiling a short wall of record covers - from Archie Bell & The Drells to Mary J. Blige - each picturing a black figure. Organized arbitrarily, the images suggest a portable, visual archive or aide-mémoire. A nearby platform was left in disarray after performances by Tate’s own Burnt Sugar and other bands; I saw a microphone, an amplifier, a magazine and a piece of raw cotton. Elsewhere, Jafa installed a shoeshine box under a Plexiglas case, the cover of Bruce Lee’s *Enter the Dragon* DVD and a Ziploc freezer bag full of Gap eau de toilette labels. Overall, Tate’s effort recalls Nicolas Bourriaud’s description of the relational exhibition space



L. Raquel Gerber, *Ori*, 1989; video still; courtesy Third World Newsreel

R. Tierney Malone, *Slow Burn*, 2008; mixed media on paper

in *Postproduction*: “a space of cohabitation, an open stage somewhere between decor, film set, and information center.”

In contrast, Sirmans made the most conventional curatorial contribution to the show. In fact, his 2008 exhibition *NeoHooDoo* might be considered *Négritude*'s closest museum-approved kin. Inspired by the writing of Ishmael Reed, a poet and playwright often associated with the Black Arts Movement, *NeoHooDoo* privileged the work of artists who use vernacular traditions and forms to model the violence and transfigurations sustained by contemporary bodies and objects. For *Négritude*, Sirmans chose several works on paper by Tierney Malone, a Houston-based artist who uses translucent paint to evoke the nostalgia of old signs and murals. One drawing suggests the square shape of a record sleeve; hand-drawn text references the proto-hip-hop trio The Last Poets, John Coltrane's landmark album *Giant Steps*, and Coltrane's “Afro Blue.”

If Malone's pieces are restrained, Papo Colo's installations are utterly heavy-handed. One involved an enormous black star (a reference to Marcus Garvey's ill-fated Black Star shipping line) dotted with sugarcane and white handkerchiefs like those worn by Caribbean field slaves. Visitors were encouraged to fold photocopies of “Négritude icons” (Barack Obama, Jackie Robinson, Harriet Tubman) into paper airplanes or boats, then toss them into the mess while meditating upon the ways in which communities disperse and converge. Instead, I found myself awed that Colo managed to so neatly trivialize the Americas' most powerful symbols of oppression.

A series of events and resources curated for the exhibition were more successful in inspiring critical dialogue around the show and its ideas. These included performances in the exhibition space by Celena Glenn, Burnt Sugar and Dallam-Dougou, as well as Cypriano's weekly screenings of Brazilian documentary films. A reading room featured a

useful timeline of the Négritude movement and books by the likes of Paul Gilroy, Amiri Baraka, Manthia Diawara and Jeff Chang. Finally, the exhibition broadsheet, with smart essays by Colo, Cypriano, Réjouis and Tate, further ensured that visitors were confronted with a range of voices.

*Négritude* barely bears a resemblance to summer shows in Chelsea, only a few blocks south. But it is powerful for precisely that reason: it demands to be understood on its own terms, which are by turns populist and maddeningly opaque, academic and embarrassingly accessible. The exhibition asserts that it is our right and privilege to be all of those things at once. Tate writes, “[Négritude] signifies everything it stands in complicated opposition to as much as it signifies itself. It ultimately is not trying to declare anything but its own messy, inscrutable humanity.” Not a finish line, in other words, but a starting point.

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