

## Contemporary Reflections on Négritude May 20 - July 25, 2009

### EXIT ART

475 10th Avenue, New York City

### SHOW

*Négritude* offered the latest revision to a concept largely credited to the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire who gave form to the cultural movement with the publication of his seminal work *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* in 1939. But if the general philosophical origins of Négritude have been largely settled, the definition and boundaries of the movement have not. Attempts to codify what the sprawling movement entails have been consistently troubled by differing opinions as to what should be kept in and what should be kept out.

Over the course of its 70 year history, interpretations, definitions and opinions of Négritude have multiplied by the square root. Leopold Senghor, the Senegalese poet and politician, defined Négritude as an idea before being a philosophy, a life, a theory, a practice, a mortality and an art. Jean-Paul Sartre described it as a “certain quality to the thoughts and conduct of Negroes” in his book, *Black Orpheus*. African thinkers regarded the Frenchman’s assessment as the facile definition of an outsider. Togolese writer Albert Franklin famously expressed his skepticism of Négritude by calling it an inconsistent philosophy that failed to link cultural independence and political freedom.

Still, Négritude has remained an important benchmark in the history of cultural philosophy and this is readily seen in its re-emergence unto contemporary debate. But does what Senghor labeled a “humanism of the 20th century” still hold relevance in the 21st century? The need to link disparate conceptions of black life through visual and literary means still exists but is a contemporary translation of Négritude necessary for this? Or is revisiting past cultural constructs a distraction? Is it an empty expression long since devoid of its cultural power in an era where its cousin constructs such as Black Nationalism and Afrocentricity have all but disappeared from cultural debate in the United States? *Négritude* never answers the questions that come with being connected to a title replete with ongoing discussion and debate.

This is not to disparage the content of the exhibition. *Négritude* featured a collective of curators - Franklin Sirmans, Papo Colo, Tânia Cypriano, Greg Tate and Rose Réjouis - who have a demonstrated capacity for interpreting contemporary Africana culture. But strip the exhibit itself of its unifying theme of Négritude and it is not discernible how it differs from other shows with post-modern sensibilities.

*Négritude*’s curators presented individual installations that communicate the ties that culturally bind a transnational community while simultaneously creating a comprehensive exhibition. But missing from the offering were corporeal representations of many of the factors of resistance that spawned Négritude. For example, Négritude initially began as a reaction



### Tierney Malone

*Portrait of an Artist*, 2008

Mixed media on paper

Courtesy of McClain Gallery, Houston, TX



### François Ziliff

*Cotton Change*, 2009

Cotton, fluorescent lights

Courtesy of the artist



**Mario Cravo Neto**

*Larôyé 048 (boy with rooster)*, 1997

Cibachrome print

Edition 1/7

Courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery



Installation view of exhibition curated by Greg Tate (foreground, left) **Xaviera Simmons**, *Unannounced Nomads (If You Are Anywhere You Are Here)*, 2009, Recycled plywood, particle board, plexiglass, spray mount, black paint, nails, plant and found images  
Courtesy of the artist



Installation view of exhibition curated by Papo Colo. Courtesy of the artist

against French colonialism in particular and manifestations of white superiority in general; the forms found in the exhibition refused to reference a particular conflict. In fact, absent from the show, or briefly referenced, were interpretations of the social and political milieu that made the assertions of black cultural pride that Négritude embodied so momentous in the 1930s.

Stretching the concept wide enough to fit all of black cultural production, the show casts Négritude as an “archipelago” of islands to which

the show’s curators retreated to imagine their installations. Each curator used the genres of visual art, film, music and performance art to fashion contemporary representations of African-American, African, Caribbean and South American cultures.

The curators did not express overt political bents toward contemporary issues in their installations and basically ignored the qualitative judgements and questions of authenticity (i.e. what is the benefit of shared African consciousness?) that have long simmered over the doctrine. The focus, instead, remained solidly on Négritude as a vessel in which different cultures trade secrets on how to deconstruct, process and reconstruct identity. What resulted was a polyrhythmic ensemble of post-modern interpretations that failed to define Négritude without complaint or concern.

Puerto Rican artist and non-profit gallery owner Papo Colo provided a table with photographic copies of a variety of iconic cultural figures from Tiger Woods to Jean-Michel Basquiat scattered over top. Visitors were encouraged to take the historic figures and fold their images into paper planes and boats that could metaphorically and literally take one to another place. A panel gave specific instructions on how to achieve this. You could then throw your icon / escape vehicle into a large, soil-filled star shaped pot with stalks of sugar cane jutting out, sending the products of black diasporic culture back to the essence.

Colo’s “broom” piece also asked visitors to participate in the exhibit’s universal concept of Négritude. Pushing the sugar aside as the visitor wrote his or her name with a stick of sugar cane, the amount of blackness showing beneath the stick demonstrated the blackness of the name. The implicit message invites the “essentialism” charge: there is a degree of blackness in everything, even if you have to dig deep to find it.

Franklin Sirmans, curator of the deMenil Collection in Houston, presented artist Tierney Malone working with media on paper. Malone’s ceremonial masks linked seminal black “conscious” music titles

from artists such as John Coltrane and the Last Poets to traditional African culture.

Tania Cypriano’s Brazilian-themed contribution was created around a program of documentary films focused on her native country and supplemented with color stills. The most striking photograph was a study in contrasts, the red extremities and yellow feet of a live chicken enveloped by a small skinny boy’s brown arm that ends in a large strong man’s hand.

Texas-based Wura Natasha Ogunji’s primary contribution was a series of looped videos. In one, a woman crawls across a barren stretch with stones wrapped to her feet. The woman’s slow progress torturously turned back each time so that the process could be repeated into oblivion.

Rose Rejouis, professor of French and Francophone literature at the New School, presented “Négritude as Dark Play.” Artist Vladimir Cybil Charlier Juste and Andre Juste spooled toilet paper made of ultra suede acrylic around cold steel and adorned it with drawings of black colonial figures. A giant scroll that covered nearly the whole rear wall of the gallery bore passages that unfurled into picture stories.

Cultural critic Greg Tate’s archipelago, “Négritude is From Mars / Negroes is From Venus,” included what he termed the “Black Mystery Anti-Panopticon,” a re-imagining of Négritude as a place for mystery, funk, music and soul. His installation featured an assemblage of cultural artifacts: a torn Gap perfume box in a plastic bag, an *Enter the Dragon* DVD box weathered from over-use or ill repair, large scale mixed media pieces on wood showing makeshift houses either burning or torn by rain, and the incorporation of 1970s soul and disco album covers.

The curators succeeded in their charge to invest each portion of the Négritude archipelago with their personal visions as each island stood in contrast to the next. However, there was little dialogue between the individual conceptions, even among similar materials such as Malone’s imagined record covers and Tate’s actual sleeves. The transnational solidarity of the disparate islands was to be made and connected by the viewer.

**The International Review of African American Art**

Vol. 22 No. 4 | 2009

In this way, the curators didn't fail to meet as much as moved beyond Albert Franklin's criticism of *Négritude*. Bereft of any effort to link cultural independence and political freedom, *Négritude's* exercise was to focus on the cultural interdependence of the Black Diaspora and show how the amalgamation of this construct fits within the context of global culture. In the 21st century, the greatest concern of *Négritude* remains the formulation of identity but sans the reactionary stands against "dominant culture" that defined its infancy. Quite simply, *Négritude* refuses to see itself through the prism of white superiority. Thus do the curators in some ways side with Sartre's argument that "Négritude exists to be destroyed. It is a transition, not a result, a means and not a final ending." In the final determination, we either see *Négritude* as an evolution of *Négritude* philosophy or a nail in its coffin. No one says for sure.

*Phillip Harvey is a writer on arts and politics and the publisher of Nat Creole, an online arts zine ([www.natcreole.com](http://www.natcreole.com)).*