

30 Americans at the Detroit Institute of Arts: The art of identity politics

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The *30 Americans* exhibition recently on view at the Detroit Institute of Arts (and opening at the Cincinnati Art Museum on March 19) contains 55 works—paintings, photographs, sculptures, installation pieces and videos—by 30 African American artists. All of them have been produced since 1975, about half in the last decade.

The collection—which is owned by the Rubell family of Miami, Florida—includes works by relatively well-known artists such as photographer Carrie Mae Weems and painters Robert Colescott, Jean-Michele Basquiat and Kehinde Wiley, as well as works by many lesser-known or up-and-coming artists.

Since 2008, the collection has been exhibited eight times at museums across the country, in Raleigh, North Carolina; Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; Little Rock, Arkansas; Milwaukee; Nashville; New Orleans; and Detroit. In all, it will be probably be viewed by tens or hundreds of thousands of museum-goers.

The online program explains that these works “focus on issues of racial, sexual, and historical identity.” The exhibition has explicitly been curated with the idea that race and, secondarily, gender and sexual orientation are the major determining factors in American social life.

It is a collection of artwork created under the influence of identity politics and thus provides an opportunity to assess the aesthetic contribution of this outlook. How do artists feel about and understand the world when they start from such a premise? What subjects interest them? What insights are they able to provide through their art?

An introductory wall text by artist Rashid Johnson (born 1977), one of the 30, asserts that “we are all capable of poly-consciousness, the ability to locate yourself in a class, and race, and gender and sexuality, and then...figuring out an identity that is very much your own as opposed to taking on the agenda of a monolithic identity.”

In practice, such “poly-consciousness” always proves to emphasize ethnic or gender identity. “Class,” which speaks to the deepest and most persistent conditions of social life, somehow never obtains its promised one-third of the deal. In *30 Americans*, it is hardly present at all.

The exhibition is divided into several rooms, each devoted to a particular theme, the first of which is “defying art history.”

The works in this room, parodies or pastiche, are mostly concerned with the idea that Western art historically has not featured enough images of black people and that it is an “act of defiance,” according to a wall text, simply to paint a black person. Next to each contemporary painting is a small reproduction of a famous work of art, and an explanation of how the former rectifies the racial or sexual prejudices embodied in the latter.

Hence, we have works such as *Hotter than July* (2005) by Mickalene Thomas (born 1971). The small painting shows a woman with exposed breasts reclining seductively on a couch. Her gaze meets the viewer’s, and her 1970s Afro hairdo is adorned with real rhinestones. The image is created with no attempt at modeling the figure or providing an illusion of depth in the scene. The outline of her body is simply filled in with a single brown hue, effectively reducing her from a person to a skin color. The image is overtly sexual, but the sensuality of the human body is obliterated by the flattened depiction.

This painting is accompanied by a small reproduction of *Olympia* (1863) by Edouard Manet, the renowned image of a high-class Parisian prostitute and her black servant. A wall text explains that Thomas, as “a female artist...challenges nineteenth-century European images of women painted by white men for male enjoyment.”

In fact, *Olympia* was painted as a critique of corrupt Parisian society. The painting caused such a scandal when it was exhibited at the Salon of 1865 that guards were employed to protect it from physical attack. The masterfully painted image of a teenage prostitute who is in such high demand that she has a servant who brings her flowers from a hopeful client was deeply embarrassing to those who would rather have pretended that all was well in European capitalism’s most modern city. It is the type of work that brings the viewer’s subjective viewpoint closer to objective reality in a powerful way.

It is simply not plausible that the curators of a major exhibition such as this are unfamiliar with the history of *Olympia*, one of the most iconic images in Western art. When they say “defying art history,” they seem to really mean “falsifying art history”—i.e., simply making things up. This is pernicious. The curators assume a low level of knowledge on the part of the viewer and seek to take advantage of that to

peddle their political agenda.

As Clare Hurley explained in a recent WSWWS review of a solo exhibition devoted to Kehinde Wiley (born 1977), “The reason why one doesn’t find ‘black and brown’ people as the subjects of Old Masters paintings is a historical and social question bound up with the development of world capitalism and bourgeois culture, and not simply a supra-historical manifestation of racial prejudice and exclusion of black cultural experience.” There is also largely an absence of working class subjects, or poor peasants, of every color and ethnicity.

The notion that only paintings by white people will have meaning to other white people, and that only images created by African Americans will have significance for African Americans, etc., is a despicable notion, refuted by the entire history of art and literature.

Nonetheless, a whole room here is dedicated to this false idea. And it is not a coincidence that none of the work is aesthetically moving or convincing. The attack on the objectively truthful character of artistic imagery, its relative universality, and the exclusivist motives of the artists ensure that none of these pictures will have a general or elevating appeal.

Another common approach in *30 Americans* is to take a serious socio-historical phenomenon, such as slavery or institutional racism, and present it in a bizarre or superficial way. There is *Duck Duck Noose* (1992) by Gary Simons (born 1964), an installation piece consisting of several Ku Klux Klan hoods arranged in a circle around a noose. There is *I Sell the Shadow to Sustain the Substance* (2005) by Glenn Ligon (born 1960), which consists of nothing more than the titular phrase, a quote from the former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, spelled out in neon. What deeper truths are revealed by such images?

Perhaps the most unpleasant work on display is *Camptown Ladies* (1998), by Kara Walker (born 1969), an image composed of paper cutouts that cover two large walls. Shown in silhouette is a series of figures including a jockey riding and whipping a black female figure—with exaggerated lips—like a horse, a nude woman holding aloft a baby who urinates into the mouth of another individual, a woman with a carrot sticking out of her backside running toward a big pile of feces. ...

An accompanying statement from the artist indicates that this is meant as a social commentary on “the ongoing psychological trauma of slavery.” “If a girl like me can come up with this stuff, then what?” she asks rhetorically. How does this help anyone?

A large painting by Nina Chanel Abney (born 1982) is entitled *Class of 2007*. A wall text explains that Abney was the only black student in her graduating class at Parsons School of Design (part of The New School in New York City) where she received her MFA. It goes on to say that Abney’s classmates found her art “hard to relate to.” In the painting, all the white students in her class have been turned into black prisoners in

numbered orange jumpsuits and handcuffs. In a separate panel, Abney has depicted herself as a white prison warden holding a rifle.

The level of self-pity is troubling. A graduate of one of the most prestigious art schools in America, where tuition is \$22,000 per term, compares her mental anguish—because of the supposed inability of certain other students to relate to her work—to that of someone behind bars.

(For the record, Abney’s online CV lists 5 solo exhibitions, 49 group exhibitions and 6 permanent collections that feature her work. She has also lectured at six universities and has been featured in the *New York Times* five times.)

What are the big experiences through which masses of people, including millions of African Americans, have passed during the period covered by the exhibition, the mid-1970s through the 2010s? Unrelenting attacks on the social position of workers, the protracted decline of the labor movement, the collapse of the Soviet Union, 25 years of virtually continuous warfare, the hijacking of a national election, terrorist attacks, countless mass shootings, a general war on democratic rights, police violence and the militarization of society, etc.—none of this is treated here.

One further point about the aesthetic problems associated with such an outlook: one notices walking through the exhibition a general inability to render the human figure in a compelling or sympathetic way. (Two small portraits by Henry Taylor [born 1958] are exceptions in this regard.) Even Kehinde Wiley’s somewhat technically impressive figures are lit up like shiny idols and typically inhabit garish, flat environments that exist nowhere on Earth. A generally negative attitude toward human beings—as they really are—reveals itself aesthetically.

The artists here came to adulthood in culturally stagnant times and were trained in the very bad school of identity politics. The intellectual and aesthetic problems expressed in their art were not created by them, but to the extent that they have imbibed these problems uncritically, their work suffers accordingly.

In opposition to this, other voices and perspectives will emerge, broader in their outlook, more democratic and less selfish. Artists who identify with all those who suffer at the hands of this system will want to depict life in every dimension



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