

Shirley Fiterman Art Center

ID: Formations of the Self

September 16, 2020 – January 15, 2021

LaKela Brown

Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings, Gold Teeth, and Egyptian Royalty, 2020

Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood

33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown

Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings of Varies Colors and Chickenheads, With Nefertiti Profiles, 2020

Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood

33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown

Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings with Eleven

Gold #2, 2020

Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood

33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown

Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings with Fourteen Gold, 2020

Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood

33 x 45 x 3 inches

Brooklyn-based LaKela Brown's bas-reliefs of bamboo hoop earrings, rope chains, gold teeth, and chicken heads delve into and celebrate Black American culture and aesthetics. Her cast plaster objects are clustered in some areas of the compositions, and spare in others, recede into the plaster and then jut forward, creating a rich and compelling textural pattern. While Brown consciously draws inspiration for them from Egyptian and Greco-Roman reliefs, they also refer directly to hip hop culture and her childhood experiences growing up in Detroit.

Before she began her current body of work Brown was focused on traditional figurative sculpture, so it is not surprising that references to the body and the body's adornment still hold a central place in her work. In its absence the body is implied through jewelry and gold that ornament it. Through her representations Brown explores elements of beauty, desire, aspiration, hope, and work embedded in these objects, as well as related issues of gender expression, class, and ownership.

As a child in the 80s and 90s, Brown watched music videos in which artists like MC Lyte, Salt-N-Pepa, and Queen Latifah often wore doorknocker earrings with the bamboo motif that appear repeatedly in Brown's work. Beyond solely referencing hip hop culture, her reliefs explore rich connections to ongoing aspects of Black culture, fashion, beauty, and identity. All the women around Brown, including her mother, aunts, and cousins, wore doorknocker earrings and, in part, she started making her current compositions by thinking back to her childhood and the ways she would play with those earrings, stacking and linking and making shapes with them. Her family and friends see themselves directly in her work, which generates various memories and stories not only for them specifically, but also for the many people that grew up experiencing inner city life, hip hop, and Black culture.

Rachelle Dang

House on Cannonball Street, 2020

Wood, glass, air-dry clay, metal, foam, epoxy, paint

Approx. 96 x 96 x 39 inches

House on Cannonball Street is an installation comprised of a small house-shaped structure, truncated tree forms with flowering and fruiting branches, and oversized sculpted seed embryos. In Hawaii, where Dang was born and raised, a majestic cannonball tree stands in the center of Honolulu's botanical garden. Thickly shrouded with branches, flowers, and hanging fruits, it was transported as a seed or sapling between colonial territories nearly 100 years ago. The street Dang grew up on is named for the cannonballs fired by artillery batteries staged in the area.

House on Cannonball Street evokes the environmental and human toll of colonialism across the Caribbean and Polynesia, the Amazon and the Pacific. Dang's meticulously handmade tree forms reference her upbringing in Hawaii, as well as the many trees taken as part of colonialist specimen gathering projects. One of the largest natural history museums, The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, undertook one such expedition to Guyana in 1922. The Field is known for its extensive specimen collections, from the expedition to Guyana alone, 235 plaster molds, 427 specimens, and 52 branches were accumulated. Additionally, 975 negatives were taken, and a cannonball tree, one of several rainforest trees prized by the expedition for economic interest or exotic rarity, was cut down and sent to Chicago for study and display. Dang built the house-like form to resemble botanical transport carriers similar to ones the Field Museum would have employed on its expeditions, adding mass-produced louver windows similar to those found at her family's home, however, they are shut tight and painted over. The fruits, branches, and bark of the severed trees are cracked and misshapen, resembling bones and anatomical parts in grayish green. Instead of a comforting familiarity, the natural forms and house-shaped structure expresses decay, confinement, and threat.

Jesse Harrod

For the love of Dan, 2020

Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal

126 x 48 inches

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As a Canadian whose parents were from South Africa and who has lived in the US for 12 years, Jesse Harrod draws their formative experiences from a broad and complex background. Issues of self-determination, inventiveness, propriety, unconventional family bonds, and explorations of humor and pleasure play critical roles in their work and their identity. They are committed to the idea of “unlearning and relearning,” particularly from non-institutional contexts. While Harrod draws on the traditional relationship between sculpture and the human body in their work, they challenge the assumption that the human body in question is the traditionally defined “normative, neurotypical form.” Through texture, color, sensuality, and materiality, Harrod seeks to decenter our expectations and explore less tangible notions of what constitutes an individual’s identity and experience.

Harrod creates their sculptural work using macramé. A technique using knotting to create textiles, macramé has a long history that dates as far back as the Babylonian and Assyrian cultures, and has come in and out of favor over the centuries. Quite popular in the Victorian era and with 19th century sailors, it faded in use and then saw a resurgence of interest in the 1970s. Macramé, in fact, is often associated with women's craft hobbies of the 70s and the adoption of many such processes became central to feminist artists’ efforts to push the definitions and expand the parameters of “fine art.” Harrod’s use of macramé similarly challenges traditional delineations between “high” and “low” art, drawing on the strategies of American feminist artists of the period. In addition to Harrod’s exploration of materiality, and the hierarchies embedded in materials and processes, their examination of the gendered bodies they are associated with, and how and why they are deemed meaningful or unworthy of value, are at the heart of Harrod’s practice.

The three works on view at the Fiterman Art Center are site specific, created for the three windows facing onto West Broadway in which they hang. Each is constructed with a metal armature over which Harrod knotted their forms using neon colored rope. By exchanging the traditional use of cotton twine, linen or hemp rope, or yarn with brightly hued paracord (a utility rope that was originally used in the suspension lines of parachutes), and shaping it into

multi-layered sculptural configurations, Harrod transforms the technique. Their “modernization” of the medium, coupled with an innovative use of color and abstracted sexualized imagery, further underscores the intersecting themes of gender and identity issues, and the notions of disruption and subversion at play in their work.

Athena LaTocha

Burning, Sulphuric, Violent, 2020

Shellac ink, World Trade Center building sand on paper

132 x 204 inches

In her work, Athena LaTocha responds directly to the place in which she is working. The idea of “place,” particularly as an Alaskan and Hunkpapa Lakota and Ojibwe artist, is central in her work and her thinking. The power and immensity of the Alaskan landscape, and LaTocha’s sense of humility and awe in the face of both nature and the industrial, have been deeply informative to her identity and creative process. She is interested in how we understand ourselves as a species relative to everything around us. LaTocha spends time in untamed wilderness as much as in industrial construction sites, bringing the experiences and materials she gathers back into the studio. Her work *Burning, Sulphuric, Violent*, created with ink on paper, is extremely large in scale, and artworks such as this one take her weeks or even months to complete. LaTocha begins by placing large sheets of paper directly on the floor in order to work on them, creating an immediacy and direct interaction that allows her the perspective of being “inside the image.” Forgoing traditional tools, such as brushes, she uses sticks, bricks, and even shredded tires to disperse ink and work the surfaces of the paper.

The new performing arts center that is rising in the World Trade Center complex is just down the street from LaTocha’s current studio (as well as the Fiterman Art Center). She has been fascinated by the materials and systems used to erect the structure, and sand from the site has made its way directly into her composition. At the same time, her abstract imagery conjures up not just impressions of the massive construction site, but also layers of memories of forest fires she experienced in Alaska, coupled with views of the sunset over the Hudson, as well as rust, and grit, and weather-worn exteriors that convey the passing of time. Stories of the land, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous narratives, many of which remain untold or have been co-opted, also provide an important subtext to her imagery.

Emily Velez Nelms

Untitled, Process of Socialization, 2020

Vinyl panels

58 x 120 inches each

Through sculptural objects, performance, film, video, writing, and installation, Emily Velez Nelms investigates the history of her family and the region of South Florida, as well as related issues of class, feminism, labor, nostalgia, and racism. Velez Nelms' long-term project *Domestic Exotic* investigates her grandmother's role as a belly dancer in Miami in the late 60s and 70s. This work is an extension of her ongoing research into 20th century cultural tourism, and specifically attractions in Florida from the 1950s on, that often displayed people of color as entertainment. Velez Nelms is interested in how these sites have been created and produced through a performative reality that, through repetition and over time, have come to be accepted as of "authentic."

The work on view for this exhibition explores aspects of entrenched racism and its relationship to stereotypes and class. The mosquito (an insect indicative of South Florida, where Velez Nelms grew up) here represents the hoarding of human resources that allows it to strengthen and flourish. The tattooed lifecycle illustrates the ways in which hoarding works hand in hand with racism and classism to shore up perceptions and stereotypes that are then codified into a "truth" that reinforces privilege in a self-fulfilling cycle. Implicit in this diagram is the way in which the structure of power (and whiteness) accumulates assets and imposes "otherness" to maintain wealth and control.

Whiteness and its relationship to economic success and stability play a central role in Velez Nelms' investigations. Her image of highly polished French-manicured nails with mosquitos embedded in the varnish allude to forms of racialized labor, as well as leisure (raising questions regarding who gives manicures and who gets them). All of Velez Nelms' family have worked manual labor jobs, and until recently had no room for leisure pursuits. Velez Nelms has recounted that her family, which were lighter in skin tone, created a socially white identity for their visibly brown children in part by moving to the suburbs, which was considered key to accessing the material privileges of middle-class families. Over the past two decades her family not only shifted from city to suburb, but also from political liberalism to conservatism with the specific aims of assimilation and of economic mobility. What Velez Nelms also teases out through her focused examination of Florida, as well as her family, is that "whiteness" (and therefore access to wealth) is variable and shifting, and functions differently in different spaces—those considered "white" in South Florida would not necessarily be perceived in the same way in other communities elsewhere in America.

Christie Neptune

Dismantling Man-Made Constructs, 2018
Single Channel HD Video and Super 8mm Film Transfer
11:19 min.

Christie Neptune

Exposing My Limits behind America's Curtain, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
24 x 36 inches

Christie Neptune

Faux legitimacy, 2018
Text on paper with pin
8.5 x 11 inches

Christie Neptune

Head Bowed in Assembled Construction, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
36 x 24 inches

Christie Neptune

James Baldwin Quote, 2018
Single Channel HD Video
Looped quote on 13inch CRT monitor
35 secs.

Christie Neptune

Sitting Like Delia With Bare-Front, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
20 x 20 inches

Christie Neptune

Sitting Like Gordon With Bare-Back, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
20 x 20 inches

Christie Neptune

"The Colorline," 2018
Readymade sculpture
36 x 20 x 71 inches

Christie Neptune

Untitled Assembled Man-Made Construct #02, 2018
Digital chromogenic print

24 x 36 inches

Christie Neptune

Untitled Assembled Man-Made Construct, 2018

Digital chromogenic print

24 x 36 inches

In *Unpacking Sameness* Neptune uses an amalgam of art historical references, allusions to historical moments, and representations of herself, to create a visible manifestation of the invisible legacies of race and gender through an installation that employs video, sculpture, and photography. By mapping these histories in an ahistorical presentation, Neptune explores the relevance of these histories to us now and the ways they have built on one another in a legacy of inequality. She also forces us to rethink our relationship to all of these different histories.

"The Colorline" is made up of a mirror, a stainless-steel stand, and a heavy green velvet drapery, and functions as both sculpture and theatrical prop—it is an actual physical structure that embodies how racism plays out. The sculpture plays a central role in a series of self-portraits on view here in which the armature frames and formally defines Neptune. Neptune also employed *"The Colorline"* in her film *Dismantling Man Made Constructs*, which features an interactive performance shot in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. During the performance, participants were divided into two groups: white participants as "Colonizers" and non-white participants as "The Colonized." Participants of the performance were provided a strict list of rules and instructional guidelines on how to assemble or disassemble *"The Colorline."*

Neptune's photograph *Exposing My limits Behind America's Curtain* mirrors *Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window*, a painting from 1658 by Johannes Vermeer, who painted his work at the height of the Dutch colonial empire and slave trade. Neptune presents herself in profile, just as the young woman appears in Vermeer's work. But instead of an open window surrounded by a luxurious interior, Neptune sits atop a metal stool, facing an acrylic sheet held in position by the chrome mechanical armature, her hands pressed flat against its surface. The green velvet curtain hangs from an unseen rod partially obscuring her body.

Another image from *Unpacking Sameness* is the photograph *Sitting Like Delia With Bare-Front, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand*. The work is a self-portrait in which Neptune mimics the posture and dress of a slave woman in a mid-18th century photo-portrait: *the Daguerreotype of Delia*, which is one in a series of slave photographs created by Louis Agassiz as part of his race studies in 1850. Neptune, a free black female, is bare chested, in blue denim pants, with the shutter release in hand, conveying intentional control over her own representation and presentation.

Anna Plesset

A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848, 2020

Oil and graphite on canvas

15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches

Through her interdisciplinary practice, Anna Plesset challenges historical narratives and investigates overlooked and lesser known aspects of the past. Her work *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848*, is part of a larger project entitled *American Paradise* that examines the history of the Hudson River School, a prominent 19th group of painters, historically associated with white men. While many women were affiliated with this iconic movement they have remained largely unknown. The name of the project is taken from *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, an exhibition catalog published in 1987 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art that perpetuates the mythology of the Hudson River School as the exclusive domain of men. However, as early as 1818—seven years before its beginning in 1825—women were painting scenes of the Catskills in styles credited to the movement’s “founding fathers,” Asher Durand and Thomas Cole.

A View of the Catskill Mountain House is a copy painted by Plesset of an 1848 painting by Sarah Cole that was copied from a painting by Thomas Cole, her brother. Only a handful of works by Sarah Cole have survived and two of those are copies of paintings by Thomas. There is a historical tradition of copying, which functioned both as a learning process and a process of paying homage. In Plesset’s version, the painting (while actually finished) looks like it is still in process of being painted from a cut-out reproduction of the original that is taped to the canvas. The small “reproduction” is actually a painstaking copy by Plesset, including even the realistically painted tape itself. Her use of trompe l’oeil painting (which literally means “fool the eye”) mimics objects and space to such an extent that they seem real, bringing the viewer into the same psychological and perceptual space as the painted imagery. The illusion inherent in trompe l’oeil is important to Plesset due to its relationship to history, which, as Plesset notes, is ultimately a construction itself. Her intention is to call attention to this, and the ways in which “fact” and “truth” can also be illusions, while reframing dominant accounts of the past, that have been largely written by white men. Her work underscores the questions of what stories and objects are given significance and visibility, and who has the authority to confer value on them?

Plesset’s painting hangs on a wall that is meant to mimic a wall of her studio. Because she does not work at an easel, but on the wall instead, there are always scuff marks, paint smudges, tape, and reference material around the work. Plesset chose to incorporate all this as part of her larger installation in order for the work to maintain its relationship to the studio, its making, its original context, and therefore, the artist herself.

Joan Semmel

Four Rings, 2003

Oil on canvas

54 x 44 inches

Joan Semmel

Revisiting, 2018

Oil on canvas

56 x 60 inches

Joan Semmel

Yellow Sky, 2015

Oil on canvas

51 x 71 inches

Joan Semmel, who began her painting career as an abstract expressionist in the 60s, turned to figuration in the early 70s. Since then she has created a prolific body of work that explores the themes of the female body, desire and eroticism, aging, and identity. Semmel moved to Spain in 1963 and returned to New York in 1970, where she became active in the feminist movement. One of the original Guerrilla Girls, Semmel was involved with several Second Wave feminist activist art groups working for gender equality. Through her explorations of nude self-portraiture and use of expressive brushwork and brilliant color, Semmel countered representations of the female body dominant throughout popular culture, pornography, and the art historical canon. Now 88, Semmel's pioneering contribution to art history is pivotal, and her vision and work remain vital.

The issues of female autonomy and control over a woman's own image (and the power dynamics inherent in that) are central for Semmel, who paints herself from the position of both subject and artist. Early in her career, she began painting her nude body from her own point of view (looking down at her breasts, belly and legs). In recent works such as *Revisiting*, she reprises those early representations, but now from the vantage point of her aging body. She also has frequently and effectively used the camera not only to capture, but also to double and dislocate her image. Semmel experiments intensively with painting itself, breaking with traditional rules of color and composition. At times she will superimpose a linear rendering of the female figure over a painted figurative image, creating compressed painted layers that are both beautiful and fragmented.

Semmel has continued to challenge norms, the male gaze, and traditional artistic conventions. There is a constant but balanced tension at play in her work, which is not just political, and not just figurative, but which hovers between the two, continuously moving back and forth between abstraction and figuration, vigorous brushstrokes and smooth surfaces, vibrant color and naturalistic tones.