

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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The Topic Is Race; the Art Is Fearless

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 30, 2008

IN the 1970s the African-American artist Adrian Piper donned an Afro wig and a fake mustache and prowled the streets of various cities in the scowling, muttering guise of the Mythic Being, a performance-art version of a prevailing stereotype, the black male as a mugger, hustler, gangsta.

In the photographs that resulted you can see what she was up to. In an era when some politicians and much of the popular press seemed to be stoking racial fear, she was turning fear into farce — but serious, and disturbing, farce, intended to punch a hole in pervasive fictions while acknowledging their power.

Recently a new kind of Mythic Being arrived on the scene, the very opposite of the one Ms. Piper introduced some 30 years ago. He doesn't mutter; he wears business suits; he smiles. He is by descent half black African, half white American. His name is Barack Obama.

On the rancorous subject of the country's racial history he isn't antagonistic; he speaks of reconciliation, of laying down arms, of moving on, of closure. He is presenting himself as a 21st-century postracial leader, with a vision of a color-blind, or color-embracing, world to come.

Campaigning politicians talk solutions; artists talk problems. Politics deals in goals and initiatives; art, or at least interesting art, in a language of doubt and nuance. This has always been true when the subject is race. And when it is, art is often ahead of the political news curve, and heading in a contrary direction.

In a recent solo debut at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in Chelsea a young artist named Rashid Johnson created a fictional secret society of African-American intellectuals, a cross between Mensa and the Masons. At first uplift seemed to be the theme. The installation was framed by a sculpture resembling giant cross hairs. Or was it a microscope lens, or a telescope's? The interpretive choice was yours. So was the decision to stay or run. Here was art beyond old hot-button statements, steering clear of easy condemnations and endorsements. But are artists like Mr. Johnson making "black" art? Political art? Identity art? There are no answers, or at least no unambiguous ones.

Since Ms. Piper's Mythical Being went stalking in the 1970s — a time when black militants and blaxploitation movies reveled in racial difference — artists have steadily challenged prevailing constructs about race.

As multiculturalism entered mainstream institutions in the 1980s, the black conceptualist David Hammons stayed outdoors, selling snowballs on a downtown Manhattan sidewalk. And when, in the 1990s, Robert Colescott was selected as the first African-American to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale,

he brought paintings of figures with mismatched racial features and skin tones, political parables hard to parse.

At the turn of the present millennium, with the art market bubbling up and the vogue for identity politics on the wane, William Pope.L – the self-described “friendliest black artist in America” – belly-crawled his way up Broadway, the Great White Way, in a Superman outfit, and ate copies of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Today, as Mr. Obama pitches the hugely attractive prospect of a postracial society, artists have, as usual, already been there, surveyed the terrain and sent back skeptical, though hope-tinged, reports. And you can read those reports in art all around New York this spring, in retrospective surveys like “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution” currently at the P.S 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, in the up-to-the-minute sampler that is the 2008 Whitney Biennial, in gallery shows in Chelsea and beyond, and in the plethora of art fairs clinging like barnacles to the Armory Show on Pier 94 this weekend.

“Wack!” is a good place to trace a postracial impulse in art going back decades. Ms. Piper is one of the few African-American artists in the show, along with Howardena Pindell and Lorraine O’Grady. All three began their careers with abstract work, at one time the form of black art most acceptable to white institutions, but went on to address race aggressively.

In a 1980 performance video, “Free, White and 21,” Ms. Pindell wore whiteface to deliver a scathing rebuke of art-world racism. In the same year Ms. O’Grady introduced an alter ego named “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire” who, dressed in a beauty-queen gown sewn from white formal gloves, crashed museum openings to protest all-white shows. A few years later Ms. Piper, who is light skinned, began to selectively distribute a printed calling card at similar social events. It read:

Dear Friend,

I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are not black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely yours,

Adrian Margaret Smith Piper

Although these artists’ careers took dissimilar directions, in at least some of their work from the ’70s and ’80s they all approached race, whiteness as well as blackness, as a creative medium. Race is treated as a form of performance; an identity that could, within limits, be worn or put aside; and as a diagnostic tool to investigate social values and pathologies.

Ms. Piper’s take on race as a form of creative nonfiction has had a powerful influence on two generations of African-Americans who, like Mr. Obama, didn’t experience the civil rights movement firsthand, and who share a cosmopolitan attitude toward race. In 2001 that attitude found corner-turning expression in “Freestyle,” an exhibition organized at the Studio Museum in Harlem by its director, Thelma Golden.

When Ms. Golden and her friend the artist Glenn Ligon called the 28 young American artists “postblack,” it made news. It was a big moment. If she wasn’t the first to use the term, she was the first to apply it to a group of artists who, she wrote, were “adamant about not being labeled ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”

The work ranged from mural-size images of police helicopters painted with hair pomade by Kori Newkirk, who lives in Los Angeles, to computer-assisted geometric abstract painting by the New York artist Louis Cameron. Mr. Newkirk’s work came with specific if indirect ethnic references; Mr. Cameron’s did not. Although “black” in the Studio Museum context, they would lose their racial associations in an ethnically neutral institution like the Museum of Modern Art.

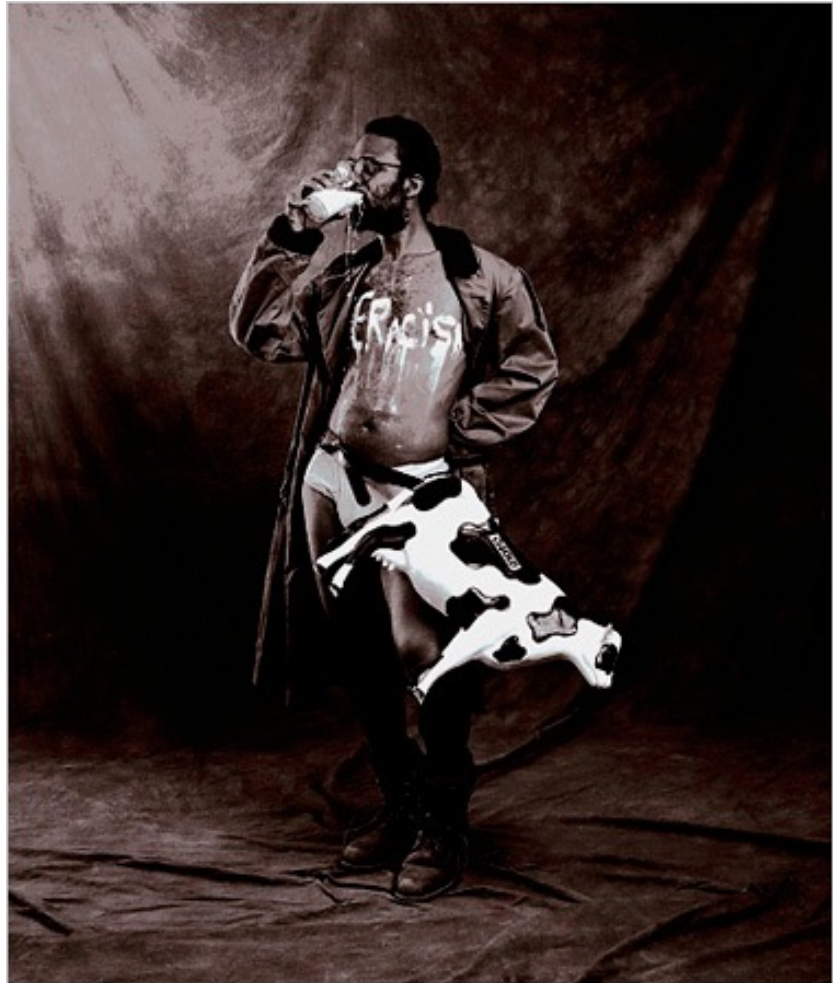
Ethnically neutral? That’s just a code-term for white, the no-color, the everything-color. For whiteness is as much — or as little — a racial category as blackness, though it is rarely acknowledged as such wherever it is the dominant, default ethnicity. Whiteness is yet another part of the postracial story. Like blackness, it has become a complicated subject for art. And few have explored it more forcefully and intimately than Nayland Blake.

Mr. Blake, 48, is the child of a black father and a white mother. In various performance pieces since the 1990s he has dressed up as a giant rabbit, partly as a reference to Br’er Rabbit of Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories, a wily animal who speaks in Southern black dialect and who survives capture by moving fast and against expectations.

In 2001 Mr. Blake appeared in a video with another artist, AA Bronson. Each had his face slathered with cake frosting, chocolate in Mr. Blake’s case, vanilla in Mr.

Bronson’s. When then two men exchanged a long kiss, the colors, and presumably the flavors, began to blend. Shared love, the implication was, dissolves distinctions between “black” and “white,” which, as racial categories, are cosmetic, superficial.

As categories they are also explosive. In 1984, when Mr. Hammons painted a poster of the Rev. Jesse Jackson as a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian and exhibited it outdoors in Washington, the piece was trashed by a group of African-American men. Mr. Hammons intended the portrait, “How Ya Like Me Now,” as a



The artist William Pope.L, on the cover of the catalog to his 2003 retrospective exhibition, “eRacism.” Credit Paul Fortin/Pope.L

comment on the paltry white support for Mr. Jackson's presidential bid that year. Those who attacked it assumed the image was intended as an insult to Mr. Jackson.

More recently, when Kara Walker cut out paper silhouettes of fantasy slave narratives, with characters — black and white alike — inflicting mutual violence, she attracted censure from some black artists. At least some of those objecting had personal roots in the civil rights years and an investment in art as a vehicle for racial pride, social protest and spiritual solace.

Ms. Walker, whose work skirts any such overt commitments, was accused of pandering to a white art market with an appetite for images of black abjection. She was called, in effect, a sellout to her race.

In a television interview a few weeks ago, before he formed plans to deliver his speech on race, Mr. Obama defended his practice of backing off from discussion of race in his campaign. He said it was no longer a useful subject in the national dialogue; we're over it, or should be.

But in fact it can be extremely useful. There is no question that his public profile has been enhanced by his Philadelphia address, even if the political fallout in terms of votes has yet to be gauged.

Race can certainly be used to sell art too, and the results can be also be unpredictable. As with politics, timing is crucial.

In 1992 the white artist team Pruitt-Early (Rob Pruitt and Walter Early) presented a gallery exhibition called "The Red Black Green Red White and Blue Project." Its theme was the marketing of African-American pop culture, with an installation of black-power posters, dashiki cloth and tapes of soul music bought in Harlem.

What might, at a later time or with different content, have been seen as a somewhat dated consumerist critique proved to be a public relations disaster. The artists were widely condemned as racist and all but disappeared from the art world.

Eight years later, with the cooling of identity politics, a show called "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage" arrived, with no apparent critical component, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. An array of fashion images, videos and artifacts associated with stars like the Notorious B.I.G., Missy Elliott and Tupac Shakur, it was assumed to be a welcoming (if patronizing) gesture to the museum's local African-American audience. Yet its appearance coincided with the general massive marketing of hip-hop culture to middle-class whites, a phenomenon that Mr. Pruitt and Mr. Early had been pointing to.

Were Pruitt-Early postblack artists ahead of their time, offering a new take on race, as a movable feast that collided with older, essentialist attitudes? If so, they would probably find plenty of company now in artists who stake out terrain both black and postblack, white and postwhite.

Mr. Pope.L (he who crawled up Broadway) does so with a posture of radical outsidersness that cancels bogus notions of racial or cultural essence. Basically he short-circuits the very concept of what an artist, black or white, "should" be. He smiles as he inches up the street on all fours; he uncomplainingly devours news of money he'll never have. He paints murals with peanut butter and makes sculpture from Pop-Tarts, the stuff of welfare meals. In many ways his main subject would seem to be class, not race. Yet race is everywhere in his art.

He works with mostly white materials — mayonnaise, milk, flour — but he also runs the Black Factory, a mobile workshop-van equipped to transform any object, no matter what color, into a “black” object. How? By covering it with cheap black paint.

For a retrospective at the Maine College of Art in Portland in 2003, Mr. Pope.L presented a performance piece with the optimistic title “eRacism,” but that was entirely about race-based conflict. In a photograph in the show’s catalog, he has the word written in white on his bare black chest. Were he pale-skinned, it might have been all but invisible.

Whereas Mr. Pope.L has shaped himself into a distinctive racial presence, certain other artists of color are literally built from scratch. A Miami artists collective called BLCK, in the current Whitney Biennial, doesn’t really exist. The archival materials attributed to it documenting African American life in the 1960s is actually the creation of single artist: Adler Guerrier, who was born in Haiti in 1975.

Projects by Edgar Arceneaux, who is also in the biennial, have included imaginary visual jam sessions with the jazz visionary Sun Ra and the late Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt. Earlier in this art season, a white artist, Joe Scanlan, had a solo gallery show using the fictional persona of a black artist, Donelle Woolford. Ms. Woolford was awarded at least one appreciative review, suggesting that, in art at least, race can be independent of DNA.

The topic of race and blood has always been an inflammatory one in this country. Ms. Piper broached it in a 1988 video installation and delivered some bad news. Facing us through the camera, speaking with the soothing composure of a social worker or grief counselor, she said that, according to statistics, if we were white Americans, chances were very high that we carried at least some black blood. That was the legacy of slavery. She knew we would be upset. She was sorry. But was the truth. The piece was titled “Cornered.”

And are we upset? I’ll speak for myself; it’s not a question. Of course not. Which is a good thing, because the concept of race in America — the fraught fictions of whiteness and blackness— is not going away soon. It is still deep in our system. Whether it is or isn’t in our blood, it’s in our laws, our behavior, our institutions, our sensibilities, our dreams.

It’s also in our art, which, at its contrarian and ambiguous best, is always on the job, probing, resisting, questioning and traveling miles ahead down the road.