

ARTFORUM

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Todd Gray

DAVID LEWIS

In pristine, almost clinically precise photographic sculptures, Todd Gray confronts savage, tangled histories. The works comprising “Cartesian Gris Gris,” his debut exhibition at David Lewis, addressed the colonization of Africa, the economic and cultural hangovers of foreign rule, and Western concepts of the exotic. These are daunting themes, enough to sink less adroit artists—but Gray’s efforts felt neither leaden nor didactic. If anything, one could overlook the conceptual heft of these polished, unapologetically attractive pieces, which take a sidelong approach to their thorny subject matter.

In the majority of works on view, Gray collaged two to four color photographs of different sizes. Their motley frames—metal and wood, thick and thin—overlapped one other with Euclidean exactitude, their edges aligning on well-chosen axes to create elegantly balanced assemblages. These arrangements shared a sense of inevitability, as though discrete pictures had floated off their hooks to obey some obscure magnetic pull. In his constellations, Gray juxtaposed photographs of European palaces and obsessively manicured gardens with pictures of wild jungles in Ghana, a former British colony. In *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)* (all works 2019), a tumbledown building, abandoned or unfinished, hovers over an inverted image of the Villa Serbelloni gardens on Lake Como in Italy. Shafts of topiary hang down like alien stalactites in the lower picture. By flipping the European scene on its head, Gray accentuates the odd exercise of trimming naturally irregular hedges into perfect symmetrical forms, a practice that, in his art, echoes the more violent project of conquering and reshaping other cultures. In the photograph above, two neoclassical columns supporting the ruined Ghanaian home seem to symbolize malignant colonial customs and aesthetic ideals that linger long after independence.

Like his art, Gray’s background is full of contrasts and contradictions. Born in Los Angeles in 1954, he spent a large portion of his career in the music industry (Stevie Wonder first took him to Ghana, where he now keeps a studio), acting as Michael Jackson’s personal photographer throughout the 1980s. His commercial work often obscures an impressive intellectual pedigree: At the California Institute of the Arts, Gray studied under John Baldessari and Allan Sekula, two of the school’s most intellectually formidable professors.

Gray takes most of the photographs in his assemblages himself,



Todd Gray, *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)*, 2019, four ink-jet prints in artist’s frames, UV laminate, 66 3/8 × 54 3/4 × 5”.

choosing to be a physical witness to his subjects, and displays them without glass to heighten their immediacy. Others he acquires legally—a rarity in an age of piratical appropriation. In *Euclidean Gris Gris (3)*, for instance, the artist combines a Hubble telescope shot of outer space, ablaze with stars, with his own photographs of a Ghanaian dancer, raffia skirt blurring across the picture, and a stone urn and leafy trellis on the grounds of a Dutch palace. The title evokes a European obsession with the orderly and rational on the one hand, and West African spiritual traditions on the other (gris-gris are protective charms or amulets worn in various cultures). While this piece might seem to reinforce a false dichotomy between African naturalness/intuition and Western civilization/logic, Gray’s reference to the universe nuances the other images by suggesting that chaos and stability, ecstatic motion and moribund stasis, are cosmic and not just colonial dualities.

Two installations in vellum, a column and a curved wall, on which Gray has drawn amoeba-like clusters of circles in charcoal, departed from the rest of the show. Gray reportedly first began taking pictures because he wasn’t a great draftsman, but, during a recent residency in South Africa, he began sketching again, drawing directly on the ground at night. As artworks, the pieces were not the most compelling objects in the gallery, but they did represent a refreshing willingness to experiment by an artist whose meticulously composed, perfectly printed works sometimes recall the obsessive control of the formal gardens he photographs. It will be exciting to watch where these other, more intuitive ways of making might lead.

— Zoë Lescaze