

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Todd Gray: Cartesian Gris Gris

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Todd Gray's new body of work, at David Lewis Gallery, may look aesthetically pleasing, with its rich images of beautiful gardens and interior architecture layered in conjoined frames, but under the deceptively sleek exterior is a nuanced observation of the continued fallout of European colonialism in Africa. The ovoid and rectangular borders of each of the eight photographic works merge with those of their compatriots, in delicate sculptural arrangements that form richly-detailed tableaux that pull the viewer in while remaining slyly obtuse. Looking further, however, the viewer is rewarded with a visual narrative strung together, picture by picture, which crosses continents and builds up a timeline of historical invasion and its results in the present.



Todd Gray, *Onisimo / Leopold*, 2019. Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 39 1/4 x 56 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York.

Assembled from a carefully curated selection of images from the artist's archive, pieces like the enigmatic *Onisimo/ Leopold* (2019) merge images of European wealth and photographs related to the African Diaspora in an attempt to create conversations about colonialism and its history, results, and continued effects on the world today. Only one work, *Coretta* (2019), actually shows a full-on photograph of a human subject, but even this image is a photograph of a photograph, and it retains the elusive distance that make Gray's works so enticing. In the way the works are displayed, each overlays a part of the image behind it, creating a visualization of how historical European views have heavily skewed a picture of African place and self. This is definitely a show that requires a companion text, and the links afforded by the gallery's brief statements on *Cartesian Gris Gris* offer only a taste of Gray's multilayered critique.

Along with the photographic works, a large translucent structure has been constructed in the gallery, in an homage to the architectural elements of Gray's part-time studio in Ghana. Cordoning off the right side of the gallery space with this curved, suspended wall and adjoining column, the artist and collaborating architect Peter Tolkin

(TOLO Architecture) bring forth what could be a striking visual element. Instead, paired with the aforementioned photographic works, this results in a confusing spatial anomaly that siphons off some of the power found in the other exhibited works. Resembling a CAD drawing of Gray's earthly studio (a photo of which can be found in the press material near the gallery's entrance), the wall is said to mimic the curve of a cocoa bean (although there is no ready reference to this within the exhibition). Given the perceived importance of such an element and its connection to the artist's practice, one would think more concrete, tangible ties between the archive-based pieces and this element would be present. Sadly, this is not the case. Instead, charcoal drawings cover part of the wall's vellum surface in a seemingly perfunctory attempt to connect all parts of the exhibition.



Installation view: *Todd Gray: Cartesian Gris Gris*, David Lewis, New York, 2019. Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York.



Todd Gray, *Palm House Blues*, 2019. Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 47 1/4 x 60 x 3 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York.

Looking to the title of the exhibition for clues, one can parse the conflation of Descartes's philosophies on the self with the idea of the *gris-gris*, the talisman worn or used to adorn buildings in voodoo tradition that are thought to perpetuate luck or protect from evil. Traditionally made of a small pouch or amulet filled with verses from the Qu'ran (though worn by believers and nonbelievers alike) and ritual objects, the *gris-gris* has acted as a powerful emblem of beliefs linked to the African Diaspora. Thinking about this historical backing, Gray's photographs act as concise collections of images that illustrate cross-cultural connections while remaining as potent compositions related to ideas of the individual and relations to the hybrid population born of European conquest.

The photographs Gray chooses act as physical stand-ins for greater conversations. By combining images of conflicting social and economic situations, the artist effectively assembles a charged object that acts as a catalyst for exploration into these circumstances. Here the idea of the *gris-gris* comes into play once more. Its function as a talisman, an object full of specific power, can be attributed to each of Gray's works and to the printed, framed photographs themselves. Indeed, a physical photograph is no more than a printed image on a piece of paper whose objecthood is often taken for granted, while its visual information is extracted and extrapolated. By framing and combining several photos into these sculptural compositions, Gray effectively foregrounds both the physical nature of his images while also alluding to the frames of artworks undoubtedly hanging within the European buildings he presents. Pieces like *Palm House Blues* (2019) become maps of interrelatedness as one is confronted by the two sides of history. Inextricably linked, each informs the other in a dynamic dance of geopolitics and the intricacies of identity in a world perpetually informed by the aftereffects of colonialism.