

# David Lewis

Todd Gray

*Cartesian Gris Gris*

April 30 - June 16, 2019

David Lewis is pleased to present *Cartesian Gris Gris*, Todd Gray's first solo exhibition with the gallery, and his New York debut.

In Stuart Hall's 1996 essay "Cultural identity and diaspora," Hall quotes Franz Fanon's description of how the colonial subject, the subject of the diaspora, is formed by the gaze of the colonizer:

The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.<sup>1</sup>

This process of the fixing and fragmenting of identity—specifically the identity of those in the African Diaspora—and the violent, coercive, but often invisible way in which the gaze, and authority of the colonizer constitutes diaspora (self-)identity, is the subject of Gray's investigation.

The means of Gray's investigation are photographic: the tools of photography, honed over his decades as a photographer of jazz, rock, and pop musicians, developed conceptually at CalArts. Gray has assembled, and continues to assemble, an archive of images. He combines multiple images, each one isolated in a frame built by the artist or purchased from thrift stores in South Los Angeles or Johannesburg. The resulting works are at once sculptural and photographic, drawn from the artist's archive and at the same time meditating on the archive as a discursive system, a set of historical rules that determine the conditions of possibility for the formation of identity and structures of knowledge.

The works in the exhibition take as their primary subject the contrast between Royal and Imperial gardens – an inquiry related to Gray's recent grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations – in London, Paris, Brussels, and Apeldoorn (the Netherlands) versus landscapes in South Africa and Ghana, where Gray maintains a studio and spends part of every year. The contrast points to an underlying historic argument: that the wealth of Europe, and therefore its aesthetic history, was extracted in large part from colonial exploitation, from African bodies and African land. And from this contrast, which is developed in each of the photo-assemblages, Gray develops further juxtapositions: between the lavish architecture of European colonialism and the ruined, even haunted remains of the houses of the colonized; between the linear Euclidian and Cartesian modalities of Greco-European logic and the talismanic gris-gris of the African Diasporic ritual; between ceremonial trophies and royal evocations of paradise combined with the plundered remains of a paradise that might-have-been.

This doubled axis of inquiry is emblemized not only in each photo-assemblage but also in the wall which divides the gallery space, a collaboration between the artist and architect Peter Tolkin, TOLO Architecture. The exterior wall of Gray's studio in Akwidaa has been recreated and inserted into the gallery as a discursive gris-gris talismanic gesture and surface for his on-site charcoal drawings.

It should be noted that the power and poetry of these works comes as much from what they conceal and crop, as what they add and reveal; the assembling of individual works further fragments the narrative, and in doing so draws attention to the shattering and fluidity of identity more generally. The fragments, have been, per Fanon—and could have only been—put together again by “another self.”

#### Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 109 from Stuart, Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora” from Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 223.

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Todd Gray (b.1954, Los Angeles) received both his BFA and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). His work is included in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, curated by Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley. Recent solo and group exhibitions include The Studio Museum, Harlem, New York; Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago; Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs; National Portrait Gallery, London; and Grand Palais, Paris, among others. Performance works have been presented at institutions such as the Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Los Angeles; and The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. His work is represented in numerous museum collections including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Minneapolis Museum of Art, MN; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA, among others. Gray was the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 2018 and a Rockefeller Foundation Grant in 2016, among others. He lives and works in Los Angeles, CA and Akwidaa, Ghana.