

# ARTFORUM

September 2019

## 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

# frieze

## Todd Gray Visualizes the Labyrinth of Black Post-Colonial Identity

The artist's montages, at David Lewis, New York, are elegant but cryptic reflections on belonging and complicity

by Mitch Speed  
July 24, 2019



It sometimes seems there must be ligatures joining people to places, and places to histories. Of course, through their very DNA, people are connected to multiple places – not to mention the cat's cradle of histories that run through them. Hence the difficulty of knowing exactly where – in terms of our language, our cultural habits, etc. – we come from. Todd Gray's new exhibition, 'Cartesian Gris Gris', gives cryptic reflection to this labyrinthine structure of belonging, with a mind to the relationship between Blackness and colonial Europe. His medium is a kind of structuralism, combining mise-en-abîme pictorialism with glancing montage transpositions.



Todd Gray, *Cartesian Gris Gris (Water)*, 2019, two archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 149.2 × 167.6 × 7.6 cm.



Todd Gray, *Onesimo / Leopold*, 2019, three archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 99.7 × 142.2 × 7.6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

There is a honed elegance to the works on display here that often outstrips the show's profound and difficult implications. In nine assemblages, framed photographs of lush landscapes – at times crafted into pristine imperial sculpture, at others left pristinely untouched – are stacked upon and hung next to images of architecture, sculpture and people. The frames are confined to a tightly controlled aesthetic range: regal walnut to gold faux-baroque. As much as echoing the architectural pomp often contained in their imagery, these pictures cast viewership itself as a conspiracy of immanence and simulacrum; a theatre of intercultural and interhistorical spectatorship.

Excepting one black and white photograph of Coretta Scott King – held within another darkly framed image and, therein, between an unnamed person's slender fingers – this show betrays no identifiable personalities. The image in which the self-effacing civil-rights icon appears is aptly titled *Coretta* (all works 2019). Behind her is a larger photograph of some neo-classical folly. Despite being intact, the structure seems a depressive ruin. This retuning of the image's resonance results from a deft collaboration between Scott King's expressive glance and Gray's montage technique. At times, the method is almost too knowing; while the artist's thematic and critical intentions are beyond warranted, the occasional unexpected turn of technique and imagery would allow this show to feel uncanny and alive. Aside from a large hanging vellum work, mimicking the architecture of Gray's Ghana studio and drawn upon with a quickly looping charcoal pattern, (*gris-gris*), this show feels like a single piece reworked nine times over in slightly varied form.

In *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)*, an unfinished building fronted by classical-looking columns forms the upper half of a vertical diptych. The lower image is inverted, causing a park of manicured trees to appear as so many verdant stalactites. Two stacked, oval-framed photos coolly bridge these grand historical themes with closer human consequence. In the largest oval, a sharply dressed man sits in an elegant easy chair, a single visible hand indexing his blackness. Blocking his face and torso, the smaller picture shows a packed bookshelf. Considering Gray's own work in Africa and his critical interest in Frantz Fanon's theory of the colonization of the mind – from *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) – the image becomes an allegory of how the printed codex, even while it is a profound human creation, is also complicit in colonial violence, via the erasure of oral histories.

Gray's oval-over-figure technique was here thrice reprised. In *Akwidaa / Luxembourg* (which hung in the gallery's office space and was not an official part of the exhibition), the faces of two embracing women are occluded by a photograph of mythic statuary. The blocking image shows an unnamed stone goddess, her arms broken off, rhyming those of Gray's living subjects, which are severed by the image's border. Thankfully, one hand remains free, tenderly holding the composition's centre, which is to say its power. Such moments of subtle discord inject Gray's otherwise highly controlled method with an element of diffuse magic.



Todd Gray, *The Haunted House of Olympia (Francis)*, 2019, four archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate, 168.6 × 139.1 × 12.7 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## Todd Gray: Cartesian Gris Gris

by Graham W. Bell  
June 2019

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, *Onesimo / 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 *Onesimo/ 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.