

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: Photographer Todd Gray traces African roots

by Sharon Mizota  
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“Double Positive,” 2018, part of Todd Gray’s latest show at Meliksetian Briggs in Los Angeles. (Michael Underwood / Meliksetian Briggs)

The strongest work in Todd Gray’s latest exhibition at Meliksetian Briggs is one of the least complex. Like all the other works in the show, it’s a combination of layered, framed photographs – the artist’s signature technique. But it radiates clear exuberance around a core of calm.

The larger of two images is a black-and-white, overhead shot of a throng of raucous, happy, young black people, probably at a Michael Jackson concert. Gray was Jackson’s official photographer in the 1980s.

Superimposed in the center of this ebullience is an oval frame containing a close-up color image of tangled tree roots, taken in Africa. (Gray splits his time between L.A. and Ghana.) The work is titled “Flora Africanus (D.C.),” and it traces a beautiful line between African roots and African American youth.



“Flora Africanus (D.C.)” by Todd Gray, 2018. (Michael Underwood / Meliksetian Briggs)

The other works in the show also deal with diaspora. Gray recently completed a residency in Italy, and he has combined portraits of his fellow residents with images of African and Italian greenery and European decorative motifs.

“Samita” consists of three layered panels. The underlying image depicts half of a brown-skinned woman’s figure. She is seated on the floor in front of a wall delicately painted with a floral motif. The other half of her body is covered by an almost equally large photograph of African foliage. Her face is obscured (or replaced?) by a smaller, round frame featuring a detail of a European tapestry depicting tropical plants.

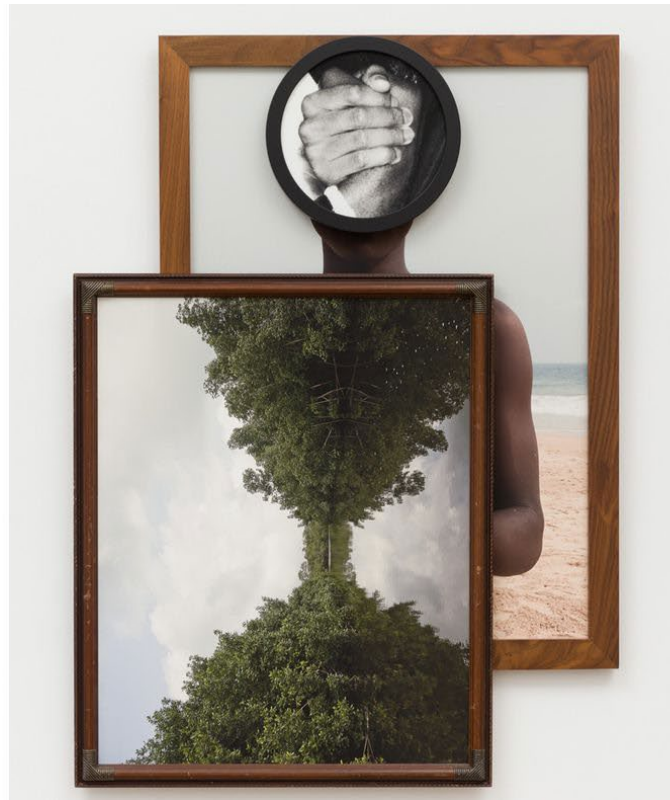


“Samita” by Todd Gray, 2018. (Michael Underwood / Meliksetian Briggs)

The work juxtaposes two types of representation: Gray's contemporary photograph of real-life foliage and the tapestry, which represents a distillation of what artists then deemed "foreign" and "exotic." This pairing is further juxtaposed with the subject, who is also presumably from somewhere else.

The work communicates the ways in which people may migrate into unexpected places, but also the ways in which places, or reductive ideas about them, get projected onto people. It's no mistake that almost all of the faces in Gray's portraits are obscured by rounded images of something else.

Gray uses these discreet framed photographs not only to interrupt expectations but to bring different worlds and realities together – without blending. He is pointedly not creating a Photoshop collage. His works hold open many windows at the same time. They may overlap and obscure one another, but each is allowed to maintain its integrity.



"Maya Venus" by Todd Gray, 2018. (Michael Underwood / Meliksetian Briggs)