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San Francisco Chronicle

‘Unruly Navigations’ challenges expectations about diaspora, embraces beauty in complexity

Letha Ch'ien - June 15, 2024



“Oculus” by Nafis White.

Photo: Photo by John Wilson White/©Museum of the African Diaspora, 2024

It might seem a tad on the nose for an institution named Museum of the African Diaspora, but one of its latest exhibitions, “Unruly Navigations,” quickly upends easy assumptions about diaspora.

Refreshingly, the show surprises in its willingness to let the diasporic experience express its multiple messy, painful and beautiful complexities without insisting on a single interpretation or issuing a judgment on unfolding histories.

MoAD curator Key Jo Lee has gathered works by artists with Bahamian, Jamaican, Nigerian-Canadian, U.S., and Haitian backgrounds, including Myrlande Constant, Morel Doucet, Vanessa German, Nadine Natalie Hall, M. Scott Johnson, Samuel Levi Jones, Anina Major, Oluseye, Winfred Rambert and Nafis M. White. The exhibition’s 22 objects include sculpture, photographs, mixed-media works, video and installations. They appear in such unusual places throughout the museum that I almost stepped on the first of them.

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"Building Blocks" by Nadine Hall.
Photo: Photo by John Wilson White/©Museum of the African Diaspora, 2024

Jamaican conceptual artist Hall's hand-molded paving blocks are set directly behind you while you're facing the ticket desk. Five of them rest on a shipping pallet on the floor. And stepping backward into the start of the show is part of Lee's design.

"I want to unmoor the traditional ways that people are used to experiencing artworks," Lee told the Chronicle.

Indeed, artworks pop up like dispersed pieces of a diaspora throughout MoAD's SoMa building: in the entry lobby, the first-floor corridor, and the second-floor main gallery space.

Made of sugar, coconut, water and peanuts, and shaped like standard cinderblocks, Hall's confectionery blocks ooze stickiness onto the museum floor. Accompanied by two fine art photographs of the blocks and a silver, three-tiered étagère on a draped table, the blocks pay homage to women who survived the Middle Passage, slavery and colonialism while building what Hall calls a "foundation" for subsequent generations.

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"Black Maiden/ On the Pulse of Morning Caged Birds" by Morel Doucet.
Photo: Photo by John Wilson White/©Museum of the African Diaspora, 2024

Lee said she has been thinking about how people deal with “devastating subject matter” and noted “in many ways, these objects are showing how that loss ... can actually generate beauty.”

“It can be a devastating kind of beauty, but it can still generate beauty,” she added.

Lee sees no conflict between luxurious, beautiful objects and complex messages.

“I love a sumptuous object. Let me not prevaricate,” Lee said with a chuckle. “If we’re inviting people into a conversation about these experiences, I want them to be able to anchor themselves in the materiality of the work and stay there.”

I found myself so anchored to Nafis White’s simply titled “Self-Portrait” installation in the exhibition’s last room that I had trouble stepping away. Thirty glass jars of varying sizes enticingly proffer their candy contents on a white table stretching the length of the room. Golden spoons and elegant handwritten labels invite visitors to sample licorice from around the world. (Ever had a mint licorice in the shape of a green pea? I hadn’t. They’re from the Netherlands.)

White chose licorice knowing it was a polarizing flavor, but the giddiness inspired by a table’s worth of free candy spurred my initial tasting. Then fear of an Alice in Wonderland “Eat me!” trick grew as the second candy dissolved in my mouth. What did White mean by “Self-Portrait?” Were these delights freely given, or was I participating in the easy consumption of sugar facilitated by the transatlantic slave trade and resulting diaspora? I had to sit down.

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"Fragility" by Samuel Levi Jones.
Photo: Photo by John Wilson White/©Museum of the African Diaspora, 2024

Using beauty and expert technique to welcome a viewer into difficult topics contrasts with exhibitions that present more explicitly violent artworks.

"The ways that we sort of make a bid of empathy over and over through showing devastated Black flesh hasn't worked," Lee said. "I am uninterested in retraumatizing my folks."

The traumas of racist law and history books are dismantled and dissolved in Samuel Levi Jones's "Fragility." The green and cream textured rectangle at first appears to be a painting, but it is in fact made of disassembled law and history books stewed into paper pulp and recast into an undulating, unreadable surface.

"It became this really powerful metaphor to me for how it feels to read these books that are meant to hold all of the truth and have it not reflect my embodied experience at all," said Lee. Harmful laws and untruthful histories swirl into inchoate turbulence. Like artifacts of a defeated regime, they can still disturb but no longer harm directly.

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“a stunning rebuke to the manufacture of your benevolence by the fat negro sculptures v.german upon the rape of her bountiful wholeness,” by vanessa german.

Photo: Photo by John Wilson White/©Museum of the African Diaspora, 2024

Condemning those histories is the very title of vanessa german’s statue, “a stunning rebuke to the manufacture of your benevolence by the fat negro sculptures v.german upon the rape of her bountiful wholeness.” A black fabric figure wrapped in an apple and pear print dress stands atop a small, two-drawer chest. Occupying the place of the statue’s head is a box of generic decorative porcelain figurines, all blonde ladies in vaguely historic tiered dresses. A mallet grasped by the statue’s left hand suggests a fragmented future for their ceramic porcelain whiteness.

In reflecting on her curation of the exhibition, Lee said, “I wanted to think about how contemporary artists make the unruliness, the disorderly ways you have to behave, visible in order to survive oppressive circumstances or to navigate not just historical landscapes but also inner landscapes and familial landscapes.”

That complexity — of diaspora and the creative, agonizing and beautiful responses to it — becomes remarkably apparent in “Unruly Navigations.”