

# artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

## Race, History, and the Body Theatrical in Atlanta, Georgia

By Sally Hansell

December 6, 2017



Fabiola Jean-Louis, *Marie-Antoinette Is Dead*, 2016. Archival pigment print on hot press bright paper, 33 x 26 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Alan Avery Art Company.

This fall in Atlanta themes of race, identity, and history are the focus of multiple art exhibitions. A new show at Alan Avery Art Company, one of the city's oldest galleries located in the affluent Buckhead district, flips the genre of nobility portraiture on its head, with a nod to the Black Lives Matter movement. Born in Haiti and raised in New York, emerging artist Fabiola Jean-Louis spent hours in museums before Old Master portraits, admiring the costumes but noting how "there were never any women of color." Her ambitiously titled show, "Rewriting History," a celebration of the black female body, seeks to correct that. (A smaller, overlapping version of this exhibition is at the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago.) The Brooklyn-based artist crafts elaborate paper gowns evoking those worn by European royals in the 15th to 19th centuries. She then places female models of color, replete with mouches and wigs, in these garments, and photographs them.

Jean-Louis's photographs recall Cindy Sherman's auto-portraits in their theatricality but focus on the psychic wounds of black women throughout American history. In *They'll Say We Enjoyed It* (2017), a doe-eyed young woman in a gilded period dress, standing with an alert white dog at her feet, is not as demure as her posture suggests. She looks to the side with a faraway gaze while, in the idealized country estate painted behind her, two white men rape a fantastical black female figure. In *Marie-Antoinette Is Dead* (2016) a woman in a cascading robin's egg blue dress reclines against pillows with a subtle "fuck-you" attitude in her sullen eyes and lips. Voodoo dolls, crystals, and magical herbs on a nearby basket suggest her power. Interspersed in the gallery with the fragile paper gowns, these "photo essays" pull us in with their saturated colors, sumptuous fabrics, and sheer beauty but confront us with pain and brutality.

In contrast to the theatricality of Jean-Louis, photographer Nancy Floyd's serial self-portraits on view at Whitespace gallery are striking for their lack of affect and glamor. Floyd, a recently retired Georgia State University professor, began taking daily black-and-white photographs of herself in 1982, when she was 26 years old and having fiery discussions with peers about the photographic representation of women. Influenced by August Sander's cataloging of the German people in their working environments, and by feminist photographer Jo Spence's documentation of her own body and class origins, Floyd presents matter-of-fact images of herself amidst quotidian objects, including those that we normally seek to hide – such as unmade beds, laundry baskets and cardboard boxes.



Nancy Floyd, *Jimmy's Robe*, 1983/2012, 2015. Archival inkjet print, 10 x 13.5 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

"Weathering Time", Floyd's exhibition of 165 self-images, is a meditation on aging and the absence that comes with loss. Through a succession of solo portraits and family snapshots (including beloved pets) what remains constant, mostly, is the artist holding the clicker and gazing directly at the camera through her owl-like glasses. As in Nicholas Nixon's annual photographs of the Brown sisters, begun in 1975, we see how human figures change yet remain the same. The gallery, with an award-winning design, occupies a converted 1893 brick carriage house behind gallery owner/director Susan Bridges's Victorian home.

In West Midtown, the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center devotes a gallery to Matthew Angelo Harrison's sand-white ceramic renditions of African masks, created with a towering handmade 3D printer. The Detroit-based artist photographed relics from private Atlanta collections and created copies that are deliberate mutations of the originals. A totemic sculpture of two conjoined heads, *Mk-015-Siamese*, (2017) seems symmetrical at first glance until slight differences become apparent between the fused heads. The effect here is to foreground racial profiling as a loss of individuality. Harrison also references ubiquitous mass production and the commodification of African artifacts. The starkness of these sculptures nevertheless manages to convey the otherworldly power of the Makonde tribal masks that inspired them.



Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Mk-015-Siamese*, 2017. Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum, 7 x 14 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Corine Vermeulen.

The title of the show, "Dark Povera Part 1," riffs on Arte Povera, the Italian avant-garde movement of the 1960s espousing the use of humble, everyday materials. Noting a similar socio-economic condition between downtrodden, postwar Italy and today's Detroit, Harrison made bulletproof acrylic and aluminum

pedestals as part of his sculptures – the materials of the windows in Detroit gas stations and fast-food joints. Meanwhile the African artifacts that inspired the sculptures are placed in tinted vitrines on the gallery floor, remaining somewhat obscured as original sources – another play on the show’s title.



Cosmo Whyte, Heirloom 3, 2010 (documentation of performance). C-Print, 60 x 40/ 36 x 24 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marcia Wood Gallery

Marcia Wood Gallery, an arts anchor in the Castleberry Hill warehouse district, shows charcoal drawings, sculptures and performative photographs by Cosmo Whyte in an show titled “Starting a Bush Fire.” The Jamaican-born artist explores notions of identity disrupted by migration – “particularly migration as an unfinished arc of motion whose final resting point remains an open-ended question,” says an artist statement. One of Whyte’s large-scale (40 by 60 inches) C-Prints depicts a barefoot man of color imprisoned in the proverbial pinstripe suit of white man’s culture. He is literally blindfolded by layers of colorful neckties obscuring his face. His elegant hands open in surprise as he apparently drops a scarlet tie that falls with serpentine curves near his crotch. Recalling Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1980 photograph of the artist’s lover in a three-piece suit with his penis exposed, this powerful work emphasizes class and sexual stereotypes as modes of acculturation.