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## Art review: 'After 1968' at California African American Museum

By Christopher Knight



Nadine Robinson

Nadine Robinson's "Coronation Theme: Organon" is a great, rumbling wall of potential power, a majestic ode to past blood, sweat and tears and a firm promise of future might. Twenty-eight powerhouse audio speakers are stacked high against a wall, the volume turned low so that a churning mix of choral music, vocal invocation and rhythmic electronic chants ebbs and flows. In a small but potent traveling exhibition at the California African American Museum in Exposition Park, the latent wall-of-sound sculpture functions as a kind of visceral conscience, seeping into the margins of the encounter one has with almost everything else in the show.

"After 1968: Contemporary Artists and the Civil Rights Legacy" includes recent and newly commissioned works from six emerging artists, including Robinson, plus the Houston-based collective Otabenga Jones and Assoc. All were born in or after 1968, the

internationally disruptive year that in the United States witnessed the brutal assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the hairbreadth election of President Richard M. Nixon on a "Southern strategy" of racial divisiveness, and more. The artists, rather than having been direct participants in the civil rights era, are inheritors of a legacy of conflict.

Adam Pendleton's three black-on-black paintings, which incorporate pictorial fragments of Sol Le Witt's sculptures of all the possible configurations of a cube while fracturing the word "Dada" in large letters, represent the inherent ambivalence. Dada is an art of blunt negation -- an anti-art. Le Witt's renewed form of Constructivism is an art of building -- of affirmation. Pendleton's paintings, slyly inserted between the materiality of sculpture and the pure abstraction of language, assert the essential necessity of both.



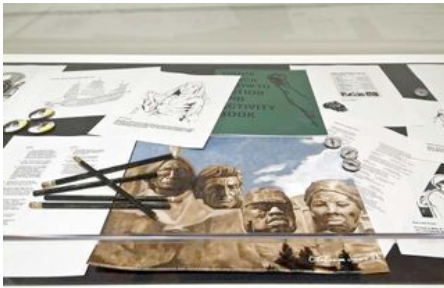
Jefferson Pinder

A similar struggle is at the core of **Jefferson Pinder's** video, "Afro-Cosmonaut Alien (White Noise)," in which he shows himself painting his face and upper torso with clown-white makeup to become a human movie screen for projected images. At first recalling Bruce Nauman's contemplative 1967-68 film "Art Make-up," in which the artist repeatedly changed his body's hue, Pinder's video suddenly shifts into a jittery assault. Dramatic, sometimes even explosive images of King and the Apollo space shot are blasted across his face, which seems to gasp for air.

Hank Willis Thomas has assembled and enlarged 41 commercial product advertisements taken from the pages of magazines targeted to black audiences, one from each year since 1968. All text has been digitally erased, so that each image is now a seamless picture. Produced by major ad agencies, many of these images are more than likely white interpretations of black desires -- "blaxploitation" -- and disconcerting in the extreme.

Actress Whoopi Goldberg raises her demure nun's habit to show glamorous gams wearing red spiked heels. Football powerhouse (and pre-murder suspect) O.J. Simpson has three legs. Grace Jones' fierce face abuts a stylized motor scooter, her streamlined features echoing its shape. A black male wrist wearing a chunky gold watch is draped across a white female abdomen. As in his "Black Is Beautiful" installation of images torn from Jet magazine, shown last year at Roberts & Tilton, Thomas makes minimal intrusions into found imagery in order to allow an accumulation of otherwise quickly scanned photographs to reveal themselves through slow contemplation.

Otabenga Jones and Assoc. -- the team of Robert A. Pruitt, D. Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus and Kenya Evans -- takes a more activist approach. (Ota Benga is the name of a 26-year-old Congolese pygmy notoriously displayed at the Bronx Zoo in 1906; he later committed suicide.) They've produced a mixed-media study guide for elementary school students. The most trenchant page on view in a display case is a picture of a reconfigured Mt. Rushmore.



Otabenga Jones and Assoc.

The High Museum of Art Rather than U.S. presidents heroically carved into the South Dakota mountains, it features Lakota Sioux Chief Sitting Bull (the federal government had seized the monument's land after the 1876-77 Great Sioux War); abolitionist (and Lincoln nemesis) Capt. John Brown; an Olmec head (representative of the colossal stone carvings in ancient Mesoamerica); and suffragist Harriet Tubman (a silent rebuke to the "great men" typified by Mt. Rushmore's gender exclusivity). The deft picture makes good use of strategies familiar from agitprop and samizdat, the traditional grassroots publishing techniques for evading official censorship.

Two artists -- Deborah Grant and Leslie Hewitt -- have been inspired by civil rights photographs in the collection of Atlanta's High Museum of Art, which organized this show and "Road to Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1956-1968," on view across town at the Skirball Cultural Center. Grant has cut out figures and collaged them in new contexts on 24 crimson and gilded panels, while Hewitt has photographed big still-life compositions with period books. Obscure commentary on past events, neither is compelling.

Robinson's "Coronation Theme: Organon," on the other hand, just won't quit. The "wall of sound" evokes the '60s, when a burgeoning youth movement was critical to winning civil rights victories. The stacked speakers are also configured in a composition somewhere between the makeshift political loudspeakers one would find on the back of a flatbed truck snaking through town at election time and an elaborate pipe organ in a church. Recalling Louise Nevelson's wall-size assemblages of scrap wood painted a uniform black, such as the 1959 "Sky Cathedral/Southern Mountain" currently installed in the Museum of Contemporary Art's "Collection" show, its shape reflects the facade of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was pastor. Megaphones rest discreetly in the upper reaches.

On first encounter, the modest volume of Robinson's sound-mix seems disappointing. All that audio power is going to waste; crank it up!

Soon, though, perception shifts. The low roar becomes an enveloping, omnipresent background hum -- the chorus of a ferocious power being held in reserve. A sense of latent capacity thrums through the work. The organ-like sculpture transforms itself into an organon, an instrument of profound knowledge whose joyful noise is the clarion of change. Slowly but surely, it makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

-- Christopher Knight

*Photos: Nadine Robinson, "Coronation Theme: Organon," 2008, audio speakers; Jefferson Pinder, "Afro-Cosmonaut Alien (White Noise)," 2008, video. Otabenga Jones & Assoc., "Untitled," 2008, mixed media. Credit: High Museum of Art*