Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art

Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, NC

At the same time that *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art* (September 1, 2016–January 8, 2017) opened at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, NC, many states in the South were on the verge of being declared “swing states” in a presidential election that made the dog-whistled codes of white supremacy audible nationwide, and unfixed the South from the political function it has performed in recent decades. Four years in the making, this exhibition is prescient in its ability to parse complexities and multiplicities to create a complex and fluid portrait of the South, and timely in its exploration of the racial dynamics that underpin social structures. The success of Southern Accent—curated by Trevor Schoonmaker of the Nasher, and by Miranda Lash, curator of the Speed Museum in Louisville, KY, where the show will travel in the spring of next year—lies in its search for the South as a sensibility, rather than a monolithic identity, a place bound strictly by geography.

The profile constructed by this survey of 60 artists is rich, naturally entangled with the legacy of slavery, the Confederacy, and the Civil Rights movement, all of which haunt the memories, the histories, the landscapes, and the present realities evident and explored in the works on view. Kara Walker’s *8 Possible Beginnings on the Creation of African America, a Moving Picture* by Kara Walker (2005), in which the artist’s signature silhouettes are animated as shadow puppets, does the heavy lifting of introducing the history of the Middle Passage to the exhibition, in a manner that is as lyrical and surreal as it is implicating. Gordon Parks’ photographs, originally made for Life magazine, follow the Thornton family as they face the daily impact of segregation in Mobile, AL, in the mid-1950s. William Eggleston is represented by some of his best-known works—studies of color, form, and daily life in post-Civil Rights Mississippi—including *Greenwood, Mississippi* (1973), an image of the ceiling in a scarlet-painted room that focuses on a light bulb and its surrounding array of white electrical cords. A glimpse of a Heimlich maneuver diagram in the bottom corner of the photograph suggests it was shot in a business, which casts a menacing tone on the blood-red walls. Moving forward the timeline loosely charted in the exhibition, Michael Galinsky’s video *The Day the KKK Came to Town* (2015) features images the artist, then only a teenager, shot on a day in June 1987, when the Klan marched in Durham in a parade. Combining the footage with interviews also recorded at the march, the work has the effect of reportage. Considered alongside Tom Rankin’s black-and-white photographs of churches and graveyards, these works show how the focus on the spiritual and “soul,” in religion, food, and music across the region, runs parallel to its long history of violence perpetrated on human bodies.

The landscape is alive in Southern Accent, functioning as its own character throughout the exhibition. Walter Inglis Anderson’s 1950s watercolors are densely filled despite their personal scale and the intimacy of their medium, reflecting the lushness of his subject: the swamps of the Gulf Coast region. Minnie Jones Evans’s drawings of the late 1960s are similarly rendered in lurid and vibrant colors that convey the buzz of insects and birds within layers of patterning. Four photographs by William Christenberry document the consumption of a house by dense foliage over a 20-year span between the 1970s and the 90s. Jessica Ingram’s photographs picture the landscape as a witness and conspirator in her *Road Through Midnight: A Civil Rights Memorial* (2006–ongoing) project, which exposes beautiful, albeit banal street views and landscapes to be the sites of hate crimes. Richard Misrach’s *Desert near Las Vegas* (1983) series catalogues the impact of forces of nature on the urban landscape. His photographs of homes in New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina feature spray-painted messages that reveal the presence of occupants hidden inside in otherwise desolate and destroyed environments. Deborah Luster’s *Silver Gelatin: Septima With Tadores* (1993) conjures the beauty of the South through the more playful relationship with nature it portrays: a barefoot girl wears a white cotton dressing gown, on soft grass, and she holds a glowing jar of tadores.

Among the nonregional artists represented is Sam Durant—an artist based in Los Angeles, by way of Seattle—who contributes *Southern Hospitality* (2010). The work consists of a standard-issue military blanket, an object emblematic of small pox and colonial oppression of Native American peoples, topped with an ax handle and a bottle of Southern Comfort—a pairing suggestive of the close ties between protection and violence, and a possible reference to “Ax Handle Saturday,” a historical event that took place August 27, 1960, when black students requesting service at a restaurant in Florida were beaten with ax handles. Work by Chicago’s Theaster Gates, who has family ties to the South, also cites the South’s relationship to whiskey production. In Gates’s *Souk Soul Food: Rickshaw for Collard Greens and Whiskey* (2012–2016), desk drawers retoold into bow handles speak to the relocation and cultural migration of black Americans to the Northeast and Midwest during the Great Migration. Hidden within the drawers, and thus unavailable for viewing, are objects representative of Gates’ larger oeuvre, including “souk ware” made for the meals he serves the community he revitalized in Chicago’s South Side.

Dario Robleto’s *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle* (2004) is a sculpture that consists of a pair of military cavalry boots—one filled with an iron and wooden leg, home-made by a Civil War soldier—that trek a path across a layer of dirt collected from various battlefields. Robleto’s disembodied soldier is just one of the hauntingly captured in *Southern Accent*, in which the dead relive their trauma, often through the living. Less sinister engagements of present-day visitors include Hank Willis Thomas’ *Black Righteous Space* (2012–2016), an interactive installation that recasts the colors of the Confederate flag in Pan-African red, green, and black, in a kaleidoscopic video that acts as a backdrop for a microphone. Visitors are encouraged to take the mic and add their voices into spaces of silence between speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and other civil rights and human rights leaders. Sonya Clark also invites participants to dismantle the language of the Confederacy in her piece *Unraveling* (2016), wherein the cloth of a Confederate flag is not cut, burnt, or destroyed by violent means, but instead unravelled by thread by thread—a method that reminds us that the logic of white supremacy is woven deep into the fabric of the country, and that it will not be dismantled with a single act.

The exhibition does not limit itself to the museum wall: listening stations offer samples of the sounds of the South—country, bluegrass, honky-tonk, the blues, and other genres—while the exhibition’s catalogue becomes a place to hold the yarns, tall tales, and other stories as integral to the self-mythologizing of the region. Still, as multidimensional and layered as *Southern Accent* is in its portrait of the South, the artworks exhibited are mostly two-dimensional and wall-bound. A third of the 60 artists in the show are photographers, and another third paint, draw, collage, or hang their sculpture or assemble on the wall. Portraiture seems to be given prevalence in the show’s pictorial density, as are narrative works and high-contrast palettes, equally in play in saturated color images and in the black-and-white of silver gelatin prints—a medium that has clear metaphorical associations, given that much of the work on view addresses race relations in the United States. The American South has been historically associated with the categories of folk, vernacular, or visionary art, or alternatively that of documentary work, as opposed to new media, performance, or social practice, for instance—genres that, in *Southern Accent*, seem to be employed by artists from outside the region who nonetheless engage with notions of Southern identity. This implicit formal divide suggests that the aesthetic language of “contemporary art” is not only a Western designation but also, in the United States, a Northern one.

—Risa Puleo

Estamos contra el muro
We Are Against the Wall
Southern Exposure, San Francisco

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik’s piñata-based installation turned the San Francisco nonprofit art space Southern Exposure (SoEx) into an immersive theater of borders in three acts: installation and opening, interventions against and onto the wall, and closing night destruction party. In so doing, Estamos contra el muro (September 9–October 15, 2016) discharged the rhetorics and political fantasies that walls have embodied historically. It also connected the history of piñata-making—which spans Western history, Chinese history, and indigenous Central American history, as carefully outlined by curator Michele Carlson in the exhibition text—to changing models of nation building and border crossing.

By dividing SoEx’s main gallery space with a giant wall formed from homemade piñatas in the shape of cinderblock bricks, Estamos contra el muro immediately contested the neutrality of the white cube. As subtle counterpoints to the dominance of the wall piece, a number of sculptural interventions took up tropes of surveillance, travel, and migration, including chilling surveillance cameras made of cardboard and paper. Several piñata “bricks” were packed into open suitcases—adaptations of the traditional form that were actually transported by Bhaumik to San Francisco from Mexico, where they were fabricated in Indigenous Purepecha by Iván Padilla Mónico, who learned to make piñatas in a Mexican border town, explicitly for export to the United States.

Other works on view addressing the immediate cultural and historical context of the US/Mexican border included a tiny scale model of Donald Trump’s infamous proposed wall, complete with a minuscule Trump figure in front of the display. The economics of border-crossing and tourism were injected into the exhibition through a set of “Migration Mixtapes,” CDs, and a shopping cart of tiny piñatas, handmade by the Bay Area-based Little Piñata Maker and originally designed to hang from a car’s rearview mirror. (These local products were available for purchase at SoEx at retail cost.) Bhaumik brought in a wide group of collaborators whose work explicitly references contested borders and xenophobia, worldwide: Tijuana collective Dignicraft’s field recordings of ambient sounds from the San Ysidro checkpoint bled into La Pelanga’s mix of global music, reflecting the formal tension of the wall itself.

The power of Estamos contra resided in the tension it created between the playful and jubilant nature of the materials and the structure of the wall itself: the “barbed wire” atop the central wall, for instance, was actually a silver-foiled garland of stars meant for a Christmas tree. A visual language of containment, concealment, and violence provided the conceptual hinges of this formal contradiction.

Among the most fascinating narratives articulated by the exhibition was the cultural history of the piñata itself, which proved to be a complicated one. At first glance, the wall would appear to function only in the context of the volatile, collective political imagination that surrounds the border between the United States and Mexico, and only that geography, but Bhaumik and her collaborators complicate this limited thinking. The piece’s 337 bricks were fabricated by the Oakland, CA-based Piñatas Las Morenitas Martinez using a Mexican papier-mâché technique; Bhaumik has cited the clay piñatas made in Colombia to be broken during Christmas as an influence; and wall text pointed out that contemporary piñatas have their origins in indigenous Mayan, Aztec, European, and even Chinese history.

Emphasizing the multiplex and composite nature of the show was the fact that the exhibition changed over the course of its run. Opening night presented the wall as a site for play and party-as-transgression. (Only upon seeing small children kicking around an oversized soccer ball and seeing adults with drinks and plates of tamales peek under the wall did I realize that it actually was installed a few feet above the floor—high enough to pass beneath, hovering like a partially open garage door.) Several days later, Cecé Carpio, of the social justice-oriented artist collective Trust Your Struggle, tagged the wall, rendering the work’s overall message at one less legible and more universal. The October 15 closing destruction party, narrated in real time by People’s Kitchen Collective, pushed the relational aesthetics of Estamos contra el muro to the point of active insurgency, and undermined any preciousness of the handmade pieces—out of which spilled hot sauce, devalued Mexican currency, and, of course, candy.

—Monica Westin

ABOVE, RIGHT: Community demolition party at Estamos contra el muro installation (photo: Sana Javeri Kadri; courtesy of Southern Exposure)