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28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month

8 FEBRUARY 2012 NO COMMENTS



By Samuel Getachew

Pamela Edmonds and Sally Frater are the curators behind Third Space Art Projects. Sway catches up with the duo as they explain what they hope to achieve with their exhibits as well as why the involvement of Canadian artists to their projects are important to their ultimate success.

Tell us about 28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month.

28 Days is a two-gallery exhibit that brings together the diverse work of Canadian artists with that of their international contemporaries in the United States and the United Kingdom. With this exhibition, as curators, we were interested in exploring how the work of contemporary artists is framed and consumed within the context of Black History Month exhibitions, particularly within current critical dialogues related to globalisation, multiculturalism and identity politics in art.

We wanted to consider how the institutionalization of acts of remembrance and recognition relating to the collective history of peoples of African descent affects the ways in which black culture in the West is represented and consumed.

Mickalene Thomas (USA), *Din avec la main dans le miroir*, 2008, mounted c-print, courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

I understand 18 artists will be involved over all. Tell us about some of the artists that will be part of the event and what are the unique talents they will be bringing to the event.

We are very pleased and excited to be presenting such a range of artists in this exhibition, many of whom have been internationally recognized for their significant contributions to contemporary art. There is also a diversity of

media – from photography, video, drawing, sculpture and installation.

For example, Robert A. Pruitt is a Houston-based artist who is presenting an installation called, *What Time is This Revolution Coming*, which is comprised of a series of six readymade clocks set to time zones in cities in the United States, Haiti, and Nyandarua, Kenya that have witnessed black uprisings. Beneath each clock is a brass plate displaying the name of the location of the corresponding clock.

The absence of a second-hand on each clock makes it appear as though time has abated. This, paired with the title of the piece, suggests that perhaps there is a need to return radical means in order to effect change in black communities throughout the diaspora.

Jamaican born, Toronto-based performance and media artist, Camille Turner is best known for her Miss Canadiana performances, [in which she portrays] a celebrity with self-declared ambassadorial power, a beauty queen on an international *Red White and Beautiful Tour*.

What is some of the wisdom you would want the attendees to take from their experience?

Work by black artists within diversity frameworks is often expected to “represent” the race, which subsequently limits its aesthetic value and by extension, the artist’s own practice. This being said, it is often also read more literally and often misperceived as being less metaphorical and more instrumental in function and effect.

While some artists refuse to show their work during Black History Month exhibitions as a political stance against the marginalization of their practices, others feel it that is one of few opportunities they have to participate in the broader cultural landscape. The exhibition asks viewers to reconsider the classificatory orders or systems of knowledge that separates non-Western cultural aesthetic categories within and throughout modernity. We are interested in audiences recognizing the impact of African diasporic and black expressive cultures on the evolving geography of global contemporary art.

You have both said, "the idea of 'reimagination' is meant to expand the context that relates to the social and intellectual history of 'black art' which has shifted within contested discourses of "post-blackness." What does that mean?

'Post-black' is a contested term that came largely into focus in contemporary discourse in 2001, when African-American curator Thelma Golden coined the idea for an exhibition called *Freestyle*, a national survey of emerging African-American artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. According to Golden, these artists were adamant about not being labelled as "black artists," though paradoxically their work was deeply interested in redefining complex notions of black identity.

This new generation of artists, who grew up after the civil rights movement, influenced by hip-hop, pop culture and multiculturalism, no longer felt responsible for presenting a (necessarily positive) Blackness that has itself become increasingly hyper-visible in the global market of multicultural commodity fetishism. Post-blackness became a strategy for thinking through a representational field dominated by the over-determined figure of the Black body and the normative assumptions of race, protest and identity articulated through. It also became a way to articulate the recent shifts in art marked by global migration and expanding notions of cultural hybridity, which has prompted a re-assessment of exhibition practices as well as the study and interpretation of art history and cultural studies



Nari Ward (USA) *Third World Bank* 6 x 6, 2010, vinyl banner, stencil ink, felt weather seal, shoe tips, shoes laces, cowrie shells, palm-fiber thatch, courtesy of Lehmann Maupin Gallery



Denniston Ewan (Canada), *Untitled*, 2011, photograph from performance, courtesy of the artist

There are many impressive Canadian artists taking part this year. What are you hoping will be their experience by being part of a very unique event?

It was especially important for us to include the work of Canadian artists, such as Sandra Brewster, Dionne Simpson and Denniston Ewan in the exhibition and that the show take place here in Toronto. We invited artists to participate in whose work illustrates an ongoing engagement with issues of race and representation, as well as with history, commemoration and, in some instances, the archive. Although the exhibition purports to be based on the premise of re-imagining Black History Month, it is also about looking at the ways in which "Blackness" is configured in a representational space. It is about examining the ways in which the work of black artists is framed and about the engagement with history and the act of remembering.

When is the event?

28 Days is on view at the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#) at the University of Toronto until February 19 and at [Georgia Scherman Projects](#) until February 29, 2012.



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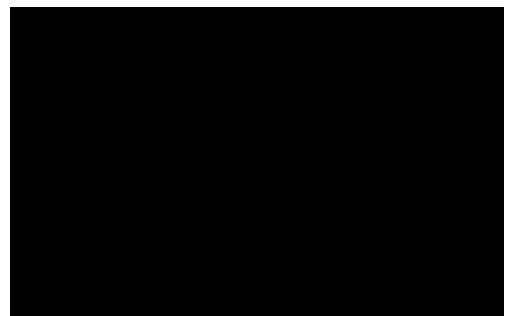
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- Yes, I wouldn't miss it for the world!
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