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'Blues for Smoke' at the Whitney Museum

By Maika Pollack 3/12 4:15

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This multifarious show, with a title from a 1960 Jaki Byard album, makes a nuanced case for “blues” as an American expressive idiom. It also offers a new understanding of identity politics in art: not as a reductive set of categories illustrated visually, but rather with artwork as the locus of resistance to oppressive power structures. Some of the work in this exhibition, which traveled from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (where it was curated by Bennett Simpson) and was overseen at the Whitney by Chrissie Iles, deals expressly with the notion of the blues. David Hammons’s *Chasing the Blue Train* (1989), is a room-sized installation in which toy trains circle between piles of coal and among wooden shapes that evoke the tops of grand pianos.

Other works, like Martin Kippenburger’s *Martin, Into the Corner, You Should Be Ashamed of Yourself* (1992), in which a dummy standing in for the artist faces the wall, make a viewer wonder if the theme of blues will hang together. Rachel Harrison’s colorful drawings of women—Dora Maar and Amy Winehouse among them—raise the same question.

“Blues” here is defined somewhat loosely, as an expressive trope for mournful resistance. Speaking truth to power is blues. So is making art in the face of injustice. If the memory of slavery is present, so is the reality of homophobia, racism, sexism and inequality. Cultural work has a lot to do with the blues, as a form of struggle.

A memorable work is Wu Tsang’s *Mishima in Mexico* (2012). The 14-minute video is a remake of Yukio Mishima’s tragic novel *Thirst for Love*. Featuring pretty, body-oiled, kimono-clad men (the artist and a writer, Alexandro Segade) doing yoga and buying each other tube socks, the video delivers lines that alternate between gay porn clichés (“I want to date a big, hunky gay samurai”) and Alain Robbe-Grillet-appropriate witticisms (“desire is so depressing, it makes me want to kill myself”). The video shows an artist who refuses to be pinned down (one exchange goes: “It’s so gay” “maybe queer” “So Japanese” “That’s why we’re in Mexico” “Sometimes I think I’m so queer that I’m straight”). The protagonists switch roles: desirer and desired, woman and man, master and servant. It’s a must-see for anyone enamored of gay samurai tragedies, but it’s also a thoughtful meditation on the complex pinballing of art, identity and desire.

Works in the show range from 1951 to 2012, but its aesthetic sensibility would seem to derive from identity art of the 1990s. Renée Green’s *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992-3), is a room-sized installation that imagines the anthropological appropriation of African-American culture in Germany during the ‘90s. A sign reading “Funk Station” covers shelves of books and magazines including a well-thumbed copy of iconic rap magazine *The Source*, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and an anthology on “Black Conflict With White America.” Magnifying glasses hang over these specimens and definitions of words like “Fly” and “Hoe” are written on the walls. The work focuses on the dissemination and commodification of hip-hop, and also on its political potential.

More historical work includes Romare Bearden’s collages from the 1960s and ‘70s, and Bob

Thompson's massive painted homage to 1960s jazz greats and Gauguin, *Garden of Music*. Senga Nengudi's splayed nylon mesh stockings stuffed with sand seem repeats of the "Now Dig This!" exhibition, which ended February 23 at PS1, and Glenn Ligon's paintings echo the Whitney's own recent retrospective. Fresher is Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit*, in which four orange peels and three empty banana skins are sewn to look like so many baseballs and footballs. The fruit peels have browned and weathered to a leathery texture.

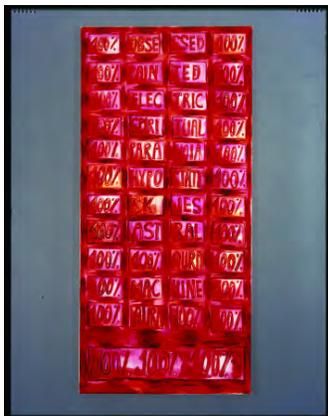
A room of 13 videos and projections gets at the show's more eclectic roots: *The Wire*, Henry Flint, Duke Ellington, Richard Pryor, Sun Ra and Azealia Banks. It's aesthetically cacophonous to the point of being almost overwhelming. Music is as much a presence in the show as visual art. The Whitney has programmed live performances by musicians like Lonnie Holley, Keiji Haino and Annette Peacock. These promise to be great.

Mark Morrisroe's pretty, elegant Chromogenic prints of drag queens and outsiders are also self-portraits, like *Blow Both of Us Gail Thacker and Me, Summer 1978*. Stan Douglas's handsomely projected video *Hors-champs* uses outtakes from a French jazz performance recording to meditate on the Rodney King beating (an event also captured in the space "hors-champs," or "off camera").

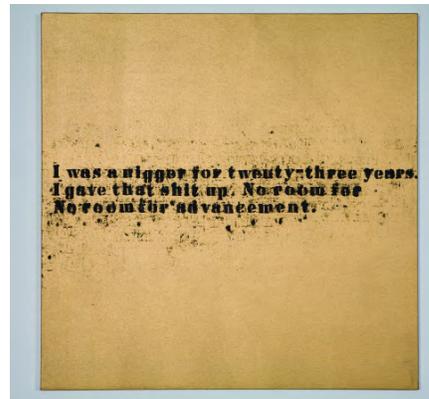
Despite its seeming lack of a clear lineage or progression, and its mix of contemporary and historical work, "Blues for Smoke" has a surprisingly clear through-line. Blues is a set of aesthetic strategies in response to tragedy and oppression. For those without power, blues is agency, and art. (*Through April 28*)



Jack Whitten, *Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington)*, 1974
 Courtesy the artist and the Birmingham Museum of Art



Jutta Koether, *100% (Portrait of Robert Johnson)*, 1990
 Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne



Glenn Ligon, *No Room (Gold) #42*, 2007
 Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles
 Image courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles
 Photo by Joshua White/© Glenn Ligon



Beauford Delaney, *Portrait of Charlie Parker*, 1968
 Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York



Melvin Edwards, *Write When You Can*, 1991
 Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates