

Racial Redefinition in Progress 'Fore' at Studio Museum in Harlem

In 2001 the Studio Museum in Harlem opened a group exhibition called "Freestyle," the first in what would be a series intended to introduce freshly minted African-American talent. And in the catalog for that show the curator, Thelma Golden, dropped a neat little cultural bomb. She referred to the group of artists she'd chosen, most of them then in their 20s, as "post-black." Heads spun, and are still spinning. Artists of an older generation, particularly those deeply invested in lifelong issues of black pride, were angry. The handle-hungry art market was flummoxed, unsure of how to capitalize on the label.

Even some young artists to whom it was applied weren't quite clear about what to do with it. Overnight the dynamics of contemporary art changed. Although little noted in the midst of the uproar at the time, Ms. Golden herself held the term "post-black" at a critical distance, floating it out as a proposition rather than advancing it as a polemic. For her it meant artists who were adamant about not being confined to the category of "black," though, as she wrote, "their work was deeply interested in redefining complex notions of blackness. Post-black," she added with a wry twist, "was the new black." More than a decade later it still is, to judge by the fourth and latest of the museum's new-generation shows, this one titled "Fore," organized by three young staff curators, Lauren Haynes, Naima J. Keith and Thomas J. Lax.

Like its predecessors it keeps racial politics alive but discreet and covers the waterfront in terms of mediums, which it samples and mixes with turntablist flair. In line with current New York trends, painting gets major attention. Three smallish portraits by Jennifer Packer (born 1985; Yale M.F.A. 2012) of art-school friends kick things off. They're traditional looking and beautiful, their suave brushwork finessed with a palette knife. Portraits by another artist, Toyin Odutola, who was born in Nigeria and now lives in Los Angeles, are more offbeat and generate interesting ideas. Ms. Odutola makes her sitters so black that their forms read like solid, featureless silhouettes from across a room. Only up close do you see that their eyes are wide open, and their skin is a porous weave of ropy ink lines, with rainbow color glinting through like light from behind.

Another Los Angeles artist, Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle, uses images from colonial-era postcards, made for European eyes, to make a point about the vulnerability of the body when seen through a racial lens. In her paint-altered version of the original cards, nude and seminude "native" women from West Africa are under assault from swarming lines of white pigment that bring to mind flames, microbes and spermatozoa.

Then the figure vanishes. It's just a shadowy smudge on an abstract gold field in a diptych by Noah Davis, and absent altogether in abstract paintings by Kianja Strobert, Sienna Shields and Brenna Youngblood.

Ms. Youngblood looks particularly impressive here. She has, however temporarily, exchanged her complicated, object-laden painting mode of a few years ago for a near-Minimalist austerity. But nothing she does is simple.

One 2012 picture in the show consists primarily of a plain white unmarked panel, yet the addition of a small scrap of stuck-on signage keeps her art in painting-plus-something-else terrain.

And "something else" in this show covers a lot of ground. What conventional formal category, or categories, can describe Harold Mendez's filmy, soot-black Veronica veils made from dryer sheets, ink and fabric softener? Or Cullen Washington Jr.'s "Caped Crusader," with its collaged black baby superhero anchored to the floor by a T-Mobile sign? Or Eric Nathaniel Mack's "Honey Hollow," consisting of nothing more than a paint-brushed blanket hanging loose on the wall and stirred by the breeze from a nearby fan?

Unprepossessing to the eye, it does a lot of conceptual hard work, mashing together the essences of painting, sculpture and kinetic installation. Depending on who's looking, the piece is either barely there, or a sly celebration of material movement in space, of performance art without bodies.

Performance art has a significant place in "Fore," as it does in the local art world these days, with blackness weaving in and out of it. It's hard to locate in a choreographically executed wall drawing by Taisha Paggett, but forms the troubled heart of a two-channel video by Nicole Miller.

On one screen Ms. Miller appears, coached by a white ballet instructor in a pristine studio as she practices classical barre exercises she learned as a child. On the other screen a group of young black woman, with men hovering, rehearse a sexually explicit form of Caribbean popular dance called daggering in a murky Brooklyn nightclub. The piece asks: Is there a connection between the two scenes? Yes. And what's the connection? No answer.

Quite different in spirit, though in its way no less inquiring, is a video called "Reifying Desire: Model It," by the speedily emerging young artist Jacoby Satterwhite. The piece was made for the show and connects whole cultural worlds.

Mr. Satterwhite is its star, and a natural one. Resplendent in spandex suits and sequined wraps, he vogues up a storm in one digitally enhanced setting after another. But the dance sequences are just one part of an exercise in multimedia maximalism that encompasses fashion, Dada, the Home Shopping Network, Sun Ra, CVS pharmacy chic and highly specialized household appliances designed by Patricia Satterwhite — the artist's mother and collaborator — who calls on art to keep schizophrenia at bay.

Mr. Satterwhite will be doing his complex thing, live, in a two-part performance art program that the museum will roll out in December and February, events that give several other artists a chance to extend their range beyond what the galleries can hold.

Steffani Jemison — one of the museum's 2012-13 artists in residence along with Ms. Packer and Mr. Washington — will present a text piece based on urban street fiction of a kind sold in the neighborhood around the museum. The polymathic artist named Narcissister will offer staged equivalents of her gender-bending photo-collages in the show. Jamal Cyrus, from Houston, will deep-fry a tenor saxophone. And Kevin Beasley, whose faintly sinister, bundle-like sculptures sit on the floor here and there, will introduce an immersive sound environment, to which no one will be admitted late and from which no one will be allowed to leave early.

An environment of a different kind, Abigail DeVille's "Haarlem Tower of Babel," is already in place in the museum's open-air courtyard. Assembled by Ms. DeVille from locally scavenged objects and materials (shopping carts, bottles, trash bags) and memorabilia from her grandmother's Bronx apartment, the piece speaks of life on the street, generational bonds, confusion, dispossession and not-having as a chronic, punishing but toughening condition.

These were themes often tackled by African-American artists in the past, including by some of those who founded the Studio Museum in Harlem in the 1960s. And the themes remain relevant now, when the country is coming out of a presidential election shot through with racism, when African-American citizens are being hit disproportionately by a brutal economy, and when the art world, despite the mult cultural surges of the recent past, still has scant room for black artists, black anything.

In the circumstances post-black feels like an iffy and unrealistic proposition. Yet it can work. Without identifying itself as "black art," Ms. DeVille's installation brings hard, pertinent existential politics into the museum. And so, in less monumental ways, does other art in "Fore," simply by bearing the clear, proud influence of older artists, living and gone, black and not. Romare Bearden and Robert Rauschenberg are among them. So are David Hammons and the other artists in "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980" at MoMA PS1. Some of the artists took part in the Studio Museum's three previous important post-black shows. The young artists in "Fore" take something from all of these forebears but do something to and with it: reshape it, update it, understate it; conceptualize it, magnify or shrink it; and, increasingly it seems, cut it loose from labels. The point is that the something is always there, ready to be passed on, being passed on, no "post" about it.