

HYPERALLERGIC

Artworks from Two Museums Share a Space, But Not a Conversation

An exhibition joins artworks from the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and Studio Museum in Harlem. While an astute idea, there's a sterility to this show that's underpinned by an uninspired curation.

by Seph Rodney | November 8, 2017



Installation view: *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art* (all photos by Bryan Conley unless otherwise noted)

PITTSBURGH — On its face, the exhibition *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*, mounted in the latter museum's galleries, is an astute idea: a group exhibition with works by 40 artists, half of which are selected from the collections of the Carnegie and the other half from the Studio Museum — all chosen to address the ideas and lived realities of identity and social inequality in the US. I was *so* down for this show when I heard about it, so much so that I could overlook the rather pedantic themes that

organized it. These include: “A More Perfect Union,” containing works that discuss democracy in relation to identity; “Working Thought,” about the relation between the nation’s economy and the labor that underpins it; and “American Landscape,” which deals with perceptions of our constructed and inherited environments.

Additionally, there are “Documenting Black Life,” “Shrine for the Spirit,” and “Forms of Resistance”— all somewhat useful themes except that in the words of Busta Rhymes, the work of the curators has already “put [their] hands where my eyes can see.” The work here is powerful and, by simply assembling it in a few interconnected rooms, I get a sense of what is at stake in the increasing social and economic inequity of our political reality.



Glenn Ligon, "Prisoner of Love #1 (Second Version)" (1992), oil and gesso on linen, Carnegie Museum of Art, Founders Patrons Day Acquisition Fund (image courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles, © Glenn Ligon)

On entering the first gallery, I encounter Glenn Ligon's "Prisoner of Love #1 (Second Version)" (1992), a text painting in which the phrase "we are the ink that gives the white page a meaning" is repeated over and over and then begins to smudge and become muddy and illegible towards the bottom, as if in the repetition (because it is not heard the first time) the sentiment becomes part of the cultural noise that renders us all crying voices in a cacophonous wilderness — each of us keening with one another as our habitat shrinks and we are inched to oblivion. Zoe Strauss gets at the anger those of us feel who grew into adulthood under circumstances that impel us to see the social world as a mean, mercenary place consistently taking advantage of us, and that taught us to fight based not only on hatred of our place in this world, but hatred of ourselves as well. Her "If You Reading This, Philadelphia" shows how that hatred spills out and spreads everywhere.

But then there are more encouraging stories. For example, Barbara Chase-Riboud's work, "The Cape (Le Manteau) or Cleopatra's Cape" (1973), presents a large, metal mosaic robe, mounted on an armature with a fall of knotted rope spilling from its center down to the floor. The piece evokes an aristocratic dignity and self-regard. In dialogue with the exhibition's themes, this sense of self is a premise upon which "a more perfect union," may be formed; it is a way to see the body as a "shrine for the spirit," and can mount "forms of resistance." A sense of dignity is also wrapped up in Ben Jones's work "Shrine for the Spirit" (1976), which takes that African diasporic body and makes it a ritualized set of components that are colorful, vibrant, and sacred. With his "Solon 6:12" (2000), Kori Newkirk takes color and makes it a sweeping curtain of beads that forms a lushly polychromatic landscape that is so deeply beautiful I wonder how he let it go from his studio.



Barbara Chase-Riboud, “The Cape (Le Manteau)” (1973), bronze, hemp rope, copper (Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the Lannan Foundation, 1998, image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY, photo by Adam Reich)

Among my other favorite pieces is Lorna Simpson’s “Dividing Lines” (1989) that makes the black figure an enigmatic presence, which aphoristic language seeks to corral and define. Phrases surrounding photographic images of a black woman in a white dress, with her back to the viewer, include: “line one’s pocket; same ol’ line; out of line.” But Simpson’s women are implacable; they stay turned from the viewer, not seeking dialogue (especially *not* in the impoverished terms of hackneyed cliché) but self-direction. Additionally, Meleko Mokgosi’s “Walls of Casbah” (2010–2012) show the real power of critique by adding his handwritten marginalia to museum captions: his more intimate and comprehensive knowledge supersedes the erudition

of the museum professional who is clearly shown to write from a blinkered perspective.

The show is laid out with a good selection of artworks; the lighting is muted but appropriate. Yet I left the show each time (I saw it twice in two days) feeling empty. I often had a similar feeling walking the Whitney Museum when it was in its former uptown location, seeing painting after painting placed to tell a story of the development of contemporary American art. Here, it feels like this is intended to be a story of the evolution of political consciousness, with work forced into the role of illustrative icon. The works don't mesh and get messy; they don't gather and exchange anecdotes; they don't speak over each other creating a busy, enlightening conversation — they don't. They dwell in their own demarcated plots of land and point beyond themselves. There is a sterility to this show that is underpinned by an uninspired curation.



Installation view: *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art* with Kori Newkirk's "Solon 6:12" (2000) visible to the left

Likely, most people reading this review are aware of the pernicious effects of the white cube, how it makes most things placed in it the beatified art object. There is a wall adjacent to the gallery advertising the exhibition. The best indication of what this exhibition might have otherwise been can be seen in the lead image of this review, which shows a wall adjacent to the gallery advertising the works in the show. They are displayed salon style, their meanings made more resonant by their close proximity — which feels like the true spirit of this show. Or it *could* have been, if that spirit had been nurtured and given room to grow.



Pope L. "White People Are Angles on Fire" (2004) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

But there is a juxtaposition in the exhibition that saves me from the disappointment I'm left with, where Pope L. has interjected one of his text pieces. Most of these pieces by Pope L. are displayed in the entranceways between galleries, and they felt too editorial for me, like

comments in the comment section of an online article. But here he puts the text up against the glass partition between this show and the adjacent gallery full of (white) marble figurative statuaries from antiquity that now call to mind Sarah Bond's trenchant critique of the idea that this work devoid of color is too often taken to represent Western civilization. It reads "white people are angles on fire." Right below the sign, one can see that group of alabaster bodies, suggesting the classical ideal they represent. I can't tell if this is due to the curation or the artist's insistence, but either way, it's insightful and pointed, and shows the potential for contemporary work to bring deeper awareness to its own physical context and thus exist in dialogue rather than a pretend solipsism.

I do think this exhibition is a great idea and needs to happen more often, but I wish it would be engined by a sense of what work can do when it is not rendered a lone voice, but sings with a partner, or joins a chorus.

20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art continues at the Carnegie Museum of Art (4400 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) through December 31.