

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

ARTFORUM

Midnight's Daydream: Titus Kaphar, Wardell Milan II, Demetrius Oliver

By Frances Richard

November 2007

The Studio Museum Harlem hosts three artists in residence every year, and gives them a summer show at the completion of their tenure. Alums of the program include David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, and Wangechi Mutu. This year's residents were Titus Kaphar, Wardell Milan II, and Demetrius Oliver, and each presented works in "Midnight's Daydream," a day-for-night fantasia investigating familial, political, and art-historical inheritance; the challenges of representing African-American desire; and compositional strategies of assemblage, deconstruction, and the juxtaposition of opposites.

Youth notwithstanding, the trio musters formidable bona fides. Kaphar and Milan attended Yale University; Oliver has mounted solo shows at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center; Milan and Oliver participated in the SMH's "Frequency" last year. The artists' interests dovetail neatly, and they must have enjoyed hanging out in one another's studios. Still, their strategies are sharply individual—indeed, Oliver's, for one, seems to have arrived at a point of transition.

This could bode well, despite the fact that Oliver—simple and incisive elsewhere—here relied on a too-hermetic system of symbols. He showed two photographic sequences and several modified found objects, all addressing ideas of cosmology and masculinity. The central piece was a forty-four-panel frieze of digital prints, each suggesting a full moon against a dark sky. Up close, the images resolve as portraits in a convex mirror, snippets of studio setups reflected in the flank of a polished teakettle. Oliver appears half-concealed behind a mirror, with solitary props in the foreground: a lantern, a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, some lightbulbs and electrical cords, raw bacon wrapped around the hafts of sledgehammers and claw hammers. Adjacent to the props stood the actual kettle, rigged to "sing" with a recording of what sounds like human screaming. So, an obsession with reflection and distortion meshed with gestures toward enlightenment (the lantern, the book), and perhaps a kind of semiotic John Henry-ism, wherein hammers, meat, and power stand for heroic self-obliteration. But why the kettle?

Kaphar and Milan also explore partly deflated yet still potent heroism. Kaphar rifles period portraiture for the series he calls "Conversations between Paintings," 2006–2007. Literally

DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

deconstructed, figures are cut partially from the canvas, crumpling the surfaces and revealing stretcher bars like perfect servants upholding the facades. Black and white, male and female maneuver into illicit pairings, leaving body-shaped voids. In one diptych, a paper doll-like white gentleman, quoted from *Vice Admiral George Darby*, ca.1727, by George Romney, tumbles from his own milieu into the lap of a stern, bare-breasted African goddess, herself adapted from Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of a Negress*, 1800. Elsewhere, Kaphar discards frames entirely—presenting canvases in disheveled heaps, like discarded garments—or overpaints turn-of-the-century portrait-studio photographs, turning white to black and finagling prosperous sitters into mixed marriages.

These are nuanced projects, if somewhat conceptually top-heavy. In comparison, Milan's work is diaristic, also invested in problems of race, sexuality, and history, but attitudinally frisky. He constructs and then photographs memory palaces, dioramas crowded with the likes of Nefertiti, the Sphinx, Christopher Columbus, Giovanni da Bologna's 1582 *Rape of the Sabines*, JFK, MLK, artificial birds and butterflies, family snapshots, girls in curlers, hot rods, and buff, boom box-toting boys. Seemingly scrapbook-casual, the tessellated images are compositionally and chromatically complex. Two other suites—graphite drawings of wrestlers whose bodies have gone skeletally transparent, and found photographs of boxers cut into girlish filigrees—are technically simpler, but aim at a similar combination of nightmare and reverie. Milan invokes homoerotic violence as ritual, and claims kinship, via titles like *Suddenly Last Summer* and "Battle Royale," with those elder poets of lush tussle Tennessee Williams and Ralph Ellison. As with Oliver's cosmograms and Kaphar's miscegenated art history, the violence and kinship are inextricable.