

Excerpt from "This Air"*

by Bennett Simpson, 2012

In a catalogue with the improvisational quality of the music, the final section of *Blues for Smoke* curator Simpson's essay "This Air" is titled "The Clearing," from a piece by O'Grady of that name in the exhibit, and discusses how the piece echoes the show's themes.

The Clearing

In her collaged photo-diptych *Body Ground (The Clearing: Or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, N. and Me)* (1991/2012), Lorraine O'Grady insists upon, rather than running from, the profound racial and sexual collisions that have shaped America from its origins. An allegory of miscegenation spanning multiple eras—from the colonial past to the contemporary present—the work depicts a trio of mixed-race couples set amidst a primeval forest clearing. On the right, a white male skeleton clad in conquistador chain mail appears to grope the naked breast of a black female figure, whose listless face turns toward the viewer. In the panel to the left, two children chase a ball toward a pile of discarded clothes (barely concealing a gun), their youth perhaps representing the early nation of Jefferson and Hemmings, while hovering in the sky overhead a white man and a black woman embrace in what appears to be reciprocal copulation. Taken together, the couples reflect the deep intermingling of pain, pleasure, abuse, and desire that gave birth to and continues to inform the peculiar hybridity of the New World. O'Grady's metaphors of complexity and "clearing" are not mutually exclusive, but dependent, the latter, really, an avowal of recognition, truth-telling, and vision that might cut through or open up the various tangles of

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prejudice that keep something like “America” in denial about its mixed identity. As the artist states:

My attitude about hybridity is that it is essential to understanding what is happening here. People’s reluctance to acknowledge it is part of the problem... The argument for embracing the Other is more realistic than what is usually argued for, which is an idealistic and almost romantic maintenance of difference. But I don’t mean interracial sex literally. I’m really advocating for the kind of miscegenated *thinking* that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here.⁴⁵

“Blues for Smoke” is likewise motivated by some basic desire to create space—to find a clearing—so that the complexity of “what we’ve already created,” our lived experience of culture and identity, might come into sharper relief. On one level, this desire can be sensed in the multiplicity of artists and artworks collected in the exhibition: in the presence of white artists placed in relation to black cultural contexts, in a framing of the blues to include questions of sexual and gender identity, and in the juxtaposition of historical tendencies that would seem “not to fit” with each other. Of the latter, one could point to the proximity created in the exhibition between artists who emerged in or exemplified an early 1990s “postconceptual” moment, with its emphasis on a critical poetics of cultural form, and artists identified with earlier and later moments. Though a viewer might often find works by Renée Green, Stan Douglas, David Hammons, Martin Kippenberger, Gregg Bordowitz, Jutta Koether, Zoe Leonard, Glenn Ligon, and Liz Larner exhibited together (whether contextualized according to generation, politics, or style), far less frequently will one see these artists alongside Beauford Delaney, Edward Clark, Alma Thomas, or Jack Whitten, whose aesthetic sensibilities were shaped in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Among the many ambitions of “Blues for Smoke” is to consider what happens to our discourses of form and culture when divergent contexts intersect—to take a first step, to slow down, to learn (or unlearn, as the case may be) from discrepancy. Is it not the case, for instance, that all of these artists, regardless of their historical moment, manifest a resistance to facile representations of identity?

This willful crossing of art historical boundaries takes its cue from, extends from, or mirrors the multiplicity of the blues as I have sought it out, and found it, in music. By way of conclusion, I should acknowledge the role that music plays in the actual installation of "Blues for Smoke." Beyond the many works that, themselves, contain or refer to song or sound, the exhibition includes an assortment of listening and viewing "stations" where music or video performance footage serves to punctuate or complement the displays of visual art. Here, for instance, one can encounter the musical art of Jaki Byard, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Mary Lou Williams, Henry Flynt, Howlin' Wolf, Bukka White, the Bad Brains, Thelonious Monk, Trouble Funk, Susie Ibarra, Death Grips, Cannibal Ox, Muhal Richard Abrams, Amina Claudine Myers, and Duke Ellington, among many others. The point of this material is neither to provide shelter from the unfamiliar or troubling artifices of contemporary art nor to naturalize music in the face of the visual—for representations of music, as any fan knows, are often highly contrived—but to express one curator's sense of the diversity and legacy of the blues, its manifold imagination, past and future. Though the intermingling of racial, cultural, and artistic discourse remains by turns active, painful, surprising, unconsidered, revealing, affirming, frightening, symptomatic, and strange—though the blues itself suggests an aesthetic of delirious surplus—we might come to the world we find ourselves in with eyes and ears open to the possibility, as William Carlos Williams observed, that "dissonance / ...leads to discovery."⁴⁶ We might neither fear this dissonance nor pass judgment on its noises, but instead simply listen and attempt to reflect. For "to lose a master desire," as Houston Baker once put it, "is to see a different America—singing."⁴⁷

45. Lorraine O'Grady, "New Worlds," exhibition press release, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, April 11-May 19, 2012, http://www.alexandergray.com/exhibitions/2012-04-11_lorraine-oand39grady.

46. William Carlos Williams, quotes in Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, 21.

47. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 202.