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AGITATED HISTORIES

WHO WAS FAE RICHARDS? HAVING “DIED” IN 1966, her story could so easily have slid into a chasm of oblivion formed by racism on one side and sexual preference on the other. Yet, transgressivity proved to be an ironic saving grace for Richards—beautiful cipher, talented actress, and an African-American lesbian far ahead of her times—because she worked in the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s when blackness in the entertainment world was a flickering, indeterminate force that either slipped under the radar or emerged haltingly, always yoked to the chariot of prejudice. This quasi movie starlet, lover of women, avatar of black beauty was, in fact, no one. Because she never existed. She is a total fiction, an extended-format creation that includes Richards’ friends, lovers, and family as conceived by artists Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye and documented in photographs that simulate old images from the twenties onward as well as color photos from the fifties and sixties that could have been done with a Kodak Instamatic camera and probably were.

Every image in this piece is a pose-within-a-pose—a fictional mise-en-scène used to interrogate racial discrimination, gender bias, and sexual inclination. But stating the themes of Leonard and Dunye’s project in this cut-and-dried fashion comes off as a paper-thin interpretation of this brilliant, multi-layered fabrication of an archive that never was. The faux documentation we’re confronted with might as well be real because the politics of the underlying issues are still vibrant in our world. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* quietly grabs space in your mind and settles there like a field of flowering thistles and burrs. But *Agitated Histories* is an exhibition, after all, that attempts to explode the accepted reality of various moments in America’s social, political, and economic narratives.

Some of the other projects in this group show are Lenny Bruce’s obscenity trial as revisited by Eric Garduño and Matthew Rana; a documentary on the use of Native American iconography as material for mascots that focuses on the well-known Santa Fe activist Charlene Teters; the exploitation of undocumented workers from South America in the video by Yoshua Okón; the resonance of past political speeches re-enacted against the backdrop of the 1970s Military Industrial Complex by Mark Tribe. There is also the odd resonance of strange historical pairings—such as Michael Jackson with Charles Baudelaire in Lorraine O’Grady’s work *The First and Last of the Modernists (Charles and Michael)*; or the conceptual joining of the painter Francis Bacon with the comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley in a painting by Deborah Grant called *Suicide Notes to the Self*. These are all works that inflect the political subtexts in *Agitated Histories* with a subtlety of thinking that opens doors without necessarily drawing dogmatic conclusions. Even if there is a bit of a stretch required in conflating Michael Jackson’s essentially early-nineteenth-century romanticism with Baudelaire’s less dramatic intellectual deconstructions, there is no denying the oddness of O’Grady’s four diptychs, which function as prickly outer shells containing kernels, if not of truth exactly, then at least an interesting thought experiment.

The video *Anthem* by Geof Oppenheimer presents a performance by an ROTC drum and bugle corps from Chicago, and the work is a seductive visual layering of marching bodies with a soundtrack that comprises the national anthems of the United States, Belgium, Mexico, and North Korea, all played at the same time and resulting in a snappy cacophony that doesn’t quite devolve

into an earsplitting chaos. This is an appealing work to sit through multiple times, even though there is nothing self-explanatory about it. Without the accompanying text in the brochure, Oppenheimer’s aesthetic choices take precedence over the actual intended content. There are, of course, nationalistic overtones but also some rather inscrutable visual symbols thrown in for good measure: an upright blank canvas, two plywood staircases, and a box formed by the two staircases sandwiched together. I know these things have meaning within the context of the militaristic figures and their music, but they are liminal objects, floating signifiers that come to life deep within our cerebral cortex, if at all.

Mark Tribe’s *The Dystopia Files* didn’t need the luxury of a fancy install or even a great deal of space. On a relatively small monitor, a seemingly endless stream of confrontational scenes unfolded between groups of protestors in this or that city and the various police forces attempting to keep order in the streets. Watching this video—which feels like it’s being streamed live against the backdrop of the current Occupy Wall Street phenomena—is a completely hypnotic experience. But I don’t think these urban confrontations can be simplistically reduced to a bad-guys-against-good-guys scenario. The nature of this information makes you ask, what are the complicated problems revealed in *The Dystopia Files*? What are some solutions to these violent cycles of discontent? Or do these documentations emphasize mainly youthful rebels without a real cause? *Agitated Histories* is, on a purely visual basis, a stimulating unified field lined with depth charges, and individual pieces push beyond their polemical limits into the unintended consequences of individual, speculative thinking.

—DIANE ARMITAGE





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"Agitated Histories"

at SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico
Review by Kathryn M Davis



Yoshua Okón, still from "Octopus," 2011, four-channel video projection, 18 min 30 sec

Continuing through January 15, 2012

Curatorial intention is key in exhibitions on a theme that present a wide array of artists. The question for "Agitated Histories" curators, who present 15 "international and intergenerational" artists in this show, is just how agitated is the viewer supposed to become? And for what reasons? "Agitated Histories" conveys the oddly paired impressions that it's a well-conceived exhibition, but one that's difficult to connect with personally: a "yes, but" kind of thing. Much of the work is quite strong, as is the opening piece in the lobby, a video by Mark Tribe of a re-enactment of civil-rights activist César Chavez speaking out against the war in Vietnam. Originally aired on the huge screen at Times Square in New York, the video is silent, with captions running along the bottom of the projection. Experiencing the artist discuss this work and his two other videos (featuring speeches by Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis), viewers will conclude that Tribe's work is inarguably compelling. It speaks well to the exhibition's theme of questioning or reconstructing historical orthodoxies.

On entering the exhibition, this reviewer felt agitation, all right, but of the ADHD type. I found it difficult to actually inhabit the galleries long enough to adequately take in the art. The space was definitely not overhung, but there were so many narratives going on throughout the show that it felt as if I was surrounded by a gang of storytellers, each urgently intent upon getting my attention. Some spoke softly yet persistently, like Daniel Joseph Martinez in "Divine Violence," a play on Sol LeWitt's modular art with an underlying discourse on politically generated violence. Ensnared in its own gallery, each of Martinez's gridded gold-flaked panels — they could have been cut out of car doors — named an organization that uses violence as a means to its end. Seeing "Greenpeace" next to "Al Qaeda," for example, poses an ethical dissonance, but it's so obvious as to be heavy handed. The work ends up as the conceptual opposite of LeWitt. Martinez's works function best when viewed from just outside the gallery space they inhabit, where they remain subtly alluring. Once inside the gallery, they convey an overly simplified didacticism.

Perhaps this is a palimpsest of the whole: Many of the works look great on first glance, then cave in with the weight of their own content. Exceptions were Geof Oppenheimer's "Anthem," exposing as it does the homoeroticism of the military. Although I'm not sure that was the artist's intended subtext, it adds layers of meaning to the video of an army band playing a jazzed-up mix of various patriotic marching songs. Lorraine O'Grady's four large-scale photographs position, in diptych format, Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson as "The First and Last of the Modernists." While the title could be argued up one theoretical side and down the other, the compositions are frankly lovely, even loving. Does "Agitated Histories" encourage change, or is it merely a string of storylines airing at the same time at full volume? If the latter is the case, I'll take mine one episode at a time, please, so that I can focus on the content.

[SITE Santa Fe](#)

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Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

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