AGITATED HISTORIES

WHO WAS FAE RICHARDS? HAVING “DIED” IN 1966, her story could so easily have slid into a chalk 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—a 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-form 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 revisioned by Eric Garciaou 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 suxte Notes to the Se7t. These all works that inflect the political subtitles 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 with Charles Baudelaire’s less dramatic intellectual deconstructions, there is no denying the address 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 Anthems by Geoff 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 malaritarian 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 phenomenon—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
"Agitated Histories" at SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico
Review by Kathryn M Davis

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 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 connect with 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.

Perhaps this is a palimpsest of the whole: Many of the works look great on first gla...

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