

BodyGround Image Descriptions

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Written to answer FAQs about the works without prescribing viewers' responses. The photomontages were not based in Surrealist or Dada randomness. To make arguments and not just images or dreams, rational sources were twisted so unfamiliar subjective material of the "other" might enter.

"Body Is the Ground of My Experience"

black-and-white photomontages, varied sizes, 1991

DIPTYCHS:

THE CLEARING: OR, CORTEZ AND LA MALINCHE, THOMAS JEFFERSON AND SALLY HEMINGS, N. AND ME.

The diptych presents the both/and extremes of ecstasy and exploitation of this troubled and still under-theorized historic relationship. In the left panel, a naked couple deliriously "floats on air" above the trees while in the clearing below two mixed-race children play near a forgotten pile of clothing where a gun rests, threatening the scene. In the right panel, the skull-headed male figure proprietarily grasps the passive female's breast. He wears tattered chain mail as if to argue that this foundational relationship of the Western Hemisphere, and its attendant duplicities, were the death of medieval "courtly love."

DRACULA AND THE ARTIST. Left Panel: *DREAMING DRACULA.*
Right Panel: *DRACULA VANQUISHED BY ART.*

The image in the left panel, "Dreaming Dracula," shows a black

woman with broken, unkempt hair, dressed in a loose white shift. Her attention is focused on the flight of broken-toothed combs descending toward her on a shaft of light. To the right, in the panel "Dracula Vanquished by Art," the same woman sits at a small wood table writing on a pad. Though there is a desk lamp, the illumination seems to come from the table itself, and her hair, still broken but now more "intentional," is haloed by its light. The flight of combs lies spent in a corner of the room.

COLLAPSED DIPTYCHS:

THE FIR-PALM

The foliage of a New England fir tree grows from a tropical palm trunk that in turn springs from an African woman's navel. Before becoming a photomontage, this botanical conceit for the artist's cultural background was originally a prop in the 1982 performance *Rivers, First Draft*.

THE STRANGE TAXI: FROM AFRICA TO JAMAICA TO BOSTON IN 200 YEARS

The artist's mother Lena (second from left) and her maternal and paternal aunts have been montaged from photos dating from 1915-25, the great period of West Indian migration to the United States. They are sprouting from a New England mansion of the type they had to work in as ladies' maids when they first arrived. The mansion-on-wheels rolls down the African woman's back.

LILITH SENDS OUT THE DESTROYERS

Destroyer-class warships spray out from the African woman's crotch, but some return to wound the woman herself. Lilith, the African model for *BodyGround*, coincidentally shared the name of Adam's first wife who, having been created at the same time and from the same clay as Adam, felt herself his equal. Lilith refused to submit to Adam, instead left Eden and was replaced by Eve.

She then gave birth to 100 babies a day by countless lovers of her choice, causing trouble in the world.

GAZE and DREAM

Models from the arts were elements of an idealized portrait of reality and potential.

In *GAZE* they were asked, for the outer figure, to express a combination of anger and contempt—the kind of look they might have if they thought someone were stupid, but couldn't say so; and for the inner figure, quiet pleasure, as if a secret thought had made them smile to themselves.

Those in *DREAM* were asked to pretend, for the outer, that they were having a light and amusing dream; and for the inner, to imagine themselves submerged in deep spiritual trance.

GAZE info: *Gaze 1* was a sculptor and performance artist; *Gaze 2*, a jazz band leader; *Gaze 3*, a choreographer; and *Gaze 4*, a classical music composer.

DREAM info: *Dream 1* was an art historian; *Dream 2*, a painter and installation artist; *Dream 3*, a costume conservator; and *Dream 4*, a sculptor.