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Black Is, Black Ain't
Michelle Menzies

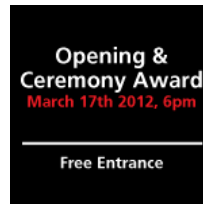
April 20 – June 08, 2008
The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

Hamza Walker's show at the Renaissance Society is that rare thing, a curatorial intervention into a potentially over-coded genre — an exhibition about race — whose light touch infuses its fidelity to a tough subject with wit and a beguiling sense of humor. Chicago, like many American metropolises, suffers from an over-literal division of space, into bifurcated North and South Sides, with the Hyde Park community of the University of Chicago providing a somewhat more textured urban fabric as a backdrop.



Todd Gray 7-34-08.5.26.05, 2005 archival pigment print 53 x 41 cm

Even so, given a topic that might seem irrevocably burdened with an a priori sense of determinism, Walker's management of his material is nothing short of accomplished. Glenn Ligon's Warm Broad Glow (2005) is a large neon sign that sets a tongue-in-cheek tone, welcoming one into the exhibition with the softly evocative promise of "negro sunshine." Paul D'Amato's 624 W. Division (2007) and Daniel Roth's Cabrini Green Forest (Portal) (2004) treat the spatial topic with variations on a highly formalist vocabulary — D'Amato's tight photographic representation of an architectural cross-section in Downtown Chicago is thick with visually compelling detail, the city's iconic skyline lurking in the background; while the German artist Roth's fantasy of a re-conceived Panopticon maps out an imaginary portal between here and there, Europe or America, the South Side and Downtown, through a series of intricate drawings and a delicately calibrated sculptural pool. Resistance to metaphor is a recurrent trope in this show, aptly conveyed in Rodney McMillian's Chair (2003) which offers us a sawed-off, busted, broken-down armchair oozing foam — the thing itself, presented with an obdurate materialism. And something inexpressibly complex about the mode with which Walker and his artists navigate what can all too often seem like the hard contours of discussions of race in America is thoroughly captured by two standout video pieces: Elizabeth Xtman's American Classics (2006), a humorous, sometimes jarring ventriloquizing of one-liners from a recognizable archive of Hollywood greats, and Thomas



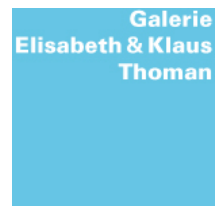
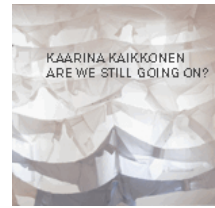
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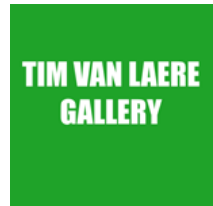


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Johnson's hilarious, nail-bitingly awkward confession of neurosis in *What a Black Man Feels Like* (2004). At the core of this exhibition's thematic, however, sit two visually cool photographs, arranged to the side of the main galley in a subtle alcove-like configuration that one is tempted to read as an architectural crux. Demetrius Oliver's *Till* (2004) and Jason Lazarus's *Standing at the Grave of Emmet Till, The Day of Exhumation, May 31st, (ALSIP, IL)* (2005) both describe an event in American civil life that carries immediate visceral import. In Oliver's image the classical proportions of a portrait head are overlaid with a dense layer of buttery, agglutinated painterly pigment, the subject's features obfuscated by pure tone. Lazarus's photograph, on the other hand, is merely observational — eschewing an obsessive perusal of photographic detail in favor of a flatly landscape-oriented, light-sensitive pictorial quality. A sophisticated handling of form amplifies the unmistakable gravitas of these two works, and indeed, it is precisely a sense of formal sophistication that one carries away from the show. *Black Is, Black Ain't* manages to create a sense of activated potential for the genre of art exhibitions about social questions by deploying its art in ways that don't attempt to legislate on the theme so much as dilate it, with skill, sensitivity and an exuberant willingness to be alternately celebratory, frank, silly and downright funny.

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