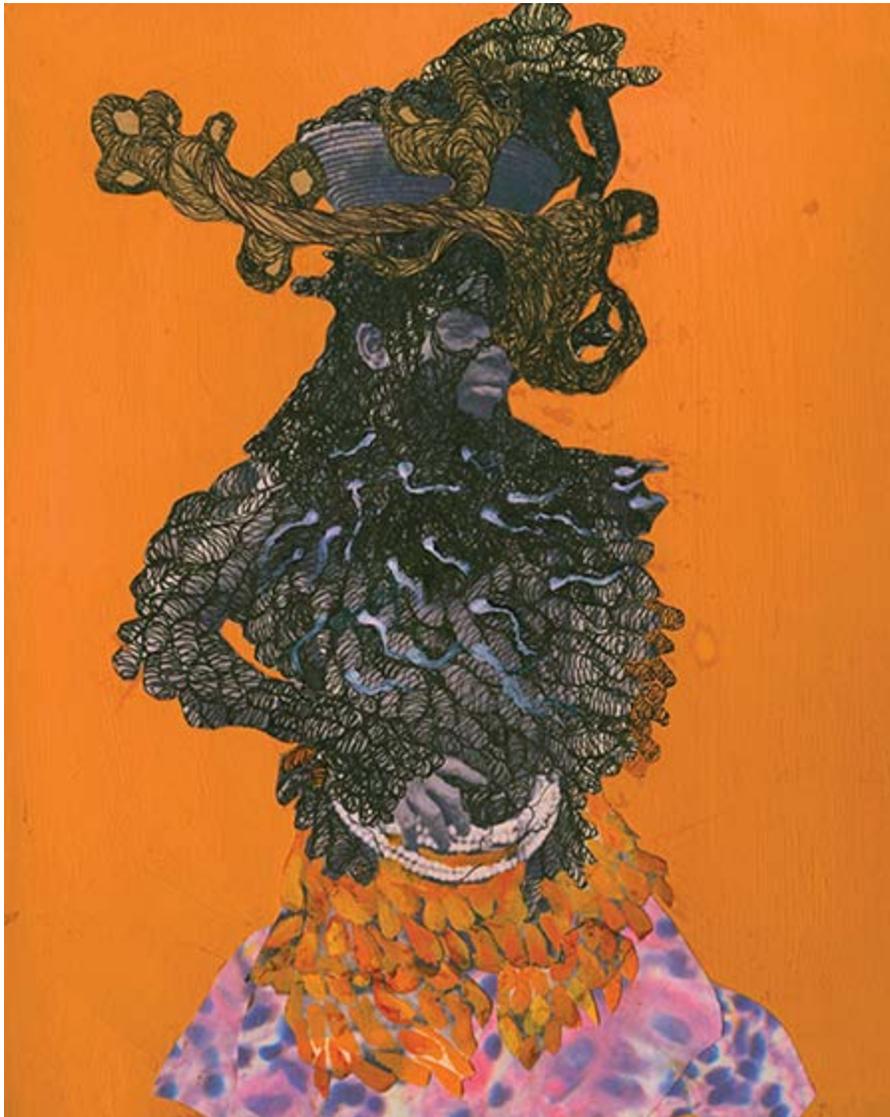


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Alison Saar: "Bearing" - Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle "Who Among Us..." at the Museum of the African Diaspora

by leora lutz

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To illuminate the problem with exoticizing women of color, it is sometimes necessary to employ visual art as a vehicle for understanding issues that are too provocative to talk about. Full disclosure, I am a white woman. For this reason, I walk in a casing that allows for the privilege of not being "exoticized" as a person of color. Although, as a woman I am not without the burden of being objectified, I cannot overlook the history that separates my privilege from the history inscribed on a black woman's body. To that end, when women talk about their bodies, the under recognized power of the Other lingers, demanding to be heard. For their concurrent solo exhibitions at the Museum

of the African Diaspora, Los Angeles based artists Alison Saar and Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle focus on the African American, and African, woman's body as a carrier of profound stories to create narratives that provoke awareness and revere both the beautiful and ugly sides of history.

Hinkle's exhibition "Who Among Us..." is concerned with the "historical present." She creates both

First: The Bastion, 2015, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Goache, cotton paper, India ink, collage on wood panel, 8" x 10"; Photo: courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery and MoAD

Second: Undone, 2012, Alison Saar, Fiberglass, cotton dress, found chair and objects; Photo: courtesy LA Louver and MoAD

fictional and reality-based narratives remarking on the interplay between perception and memory, between culture and reframed history. Hinkle's exhibition, in the museum's second floor galleries, presents a small survey of three concurrent series, spanning six years. *The Uninvited Series* includes appropriated images of women from West African ethnographic photography from the 19th and 20th centuries. Each one is embellished with glistening gold leaf, sparkling beads, or mixed-media collage, creating polymorphic interpretations likening colonialization to virus and disease. The treatment renders the women as mythical creatures, remarking upon Western archeological exploitation of African women as objects—egregiously displayed as artifacts of “primitive” sexuality and culture. The *Tituba Series* is based on Maryse Condé's 1986 novel, “I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem.” Hinkle uses the fictitious character Tituba to personify issues about Otherness, as well as a way of grappling with her own first-hand experience as a black pregnant woman. The mysterious portraits in washy black ink are punctuated by visceral corporeality, including references to fellatio and vomiting, or engorged breasts. Several pieces from *The Kentifrica Project* are also on display, including elaborate costumes, unusual relics and maps made of hair. The project is in part a “museum” as well as performance and sculpture that reimagines story-telling and make the gaps in African American history more apparent. The tongue-in-cheek project references Pop culture, such as Afrika Bambaataa, the seminal hip-hop DJ, as well fictitious geographical maps showing large land masses that do not exist in the reality we are familiar with. In doing so, Hinkle comments on the ways in which descendants of lost or little-known history find their footing in a world that is trying to erase how they got here.

Saar's exhibition occupies the third floor of the museum, and its adjoining balconies. Titled “Bearing,” Saar is concerned with how “history guides the way society conceptualizes identity,” using symbolism and the deep meaning of materials such as cotton to bring issues of identity to the forefront. Drawing from African polytheism and religious fetish objects, as well as the history of African American slavery, Saar focuses on the channels of communication and meaning that are carried by women's bodies. Predominantly sculpture, the work addresses a variety of issues, such as the woman's body as giver of life, burdens of cotton industry labor, and what it means to be black, particularly in the American South. Many of the pieces are interactive, allowing the viewer to press bellows that drip red water like blood, or to peer into bellies that are like vessels of untold pain and suffering.

Saar reflected on her extensive representation of the body during a talk at the museum on November 11 with the poet Camille Dungy, “It



First: *The Bastion*, 2015, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Goauche, cotton paper, India ink, collage on wood panel, 8" x 10"; Photo: courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery and MoAD

Second: *Undone*, 2012, **Alison Saar**, Fiberglass, cotton dress, found chair and objects; Photo: courtesy LA Louver and MoAD

wasn't until I made the outside that I could talk about the inside." In this way, the sculpture is a metaphorical speaker for the issues that are difficult to discuss, but must be said. During their conversation, Dungy read from her poetry series "Frequently Asked Questions," sharing her experience as a mother of color. Would passersby mistake her for her child's nanny? What kind of discomfort would be caused to both black and white attendees at her baby shower when traditional African methods of swaddling are demonstrated? Her very candid accounts affect women of color on a daily basis. Likewise, both Saar and Hinkle boldly and compassionately remind us that conversations about race and women's bodies still need to happen, and that every cliché and stereotype of black women's bodies is based on a painful reality that is endangered every time attempts are made to forget it. As Dungy poignantly observed, "There is nothing figurative about us."

http://www.artltdmag.com/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1452643024&archive=&start_from=&ucat=43&

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