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ART REVIEW

More in 'Portraits' than meets the eye

By Kenneth Baker

Visitors to the Museum of the African Diaspora may enter its just-opened exhibition, "Portraits and Other Likenesses From SFMOMA," confident of recognizing a portrait when they see one, and leave with that confidence shaken.

This would probably displease neither MeAD nor the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which with this project notices another in its string of loan exhibitions to neighboring institutions during its extended closure for expansion.

Some things on view, such as African photographer Seydou Keita's untitled black-and-white studio shot from the early '50s, qualify intuitively as portraits. A sympathetic image of a dressed-up young man trying to act natural while holding an apparently artificial

Portraits and Other Likenesses From SFMOMA: Paintings, sculpture, video, photographs and installations. Through Oct. 11, Museum of the African Diaspora, 605 Mission St., S.F. (415) 398-7200, www.meadsf.org.

flower shows him sitting before a backdrop of floral-patterned fabric. We learn nothing of the picture's context, but it suggests a guideless collision between photographer and sitter to make the latter appealing, perhaps as a visitor.

The picture's status as a portrait seems to turn on the magnetism it exerts on a viewer beyond whatever sociological or documentary interest it may have.

That magnetism owes something to the work's exuberance as a record of an individual's existence, not merely as a fact but as a factor in — a pressure

upon — our sense of what marks a personal presence in the world.

Creative marks of identity take many forms besides pictorial or sculptural likenesses, or so argues the MeAD/SFMOMA show. The exhibition includes a Nick Cave "Soundkull" (2000), an elaborate costume with Afro-Caribbean aesthetic roots that conceals a wearer's identity but makes attention-getting sounds with every motion.

The work looks nothing like Cave himself, but it and others he has made define a professional identity and serve as an autobiographical marker in that he first made one right after the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police in 1991, thinking of it as a suit of armor.

Thinking of contemporary painting at the time, John Berger remarked more than 20 years ago that the social function of a "Portrait" mutates on Es-



Don Ross / SFMOMA

"Wedding Portrait" (2012), an acrylic, pastel, marble dust, fabric and electrostatic transfer by Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

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Poignant portraiture

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portrait had devolved to mere verification of a photographer's position in a social hierarchy. Diane Kofowale Wilby plays upon that idea, intensely in a characteristic work such as "Unconsidered the Great" (2002), which depicts a young black man — who happens to be a nephew of Miles Davis — as an artist promisingly framed here — in contemporary dress and the trappings of traditional European dignitary portraiture.

Wilby's work, and about two dozen other pieces, opened recent SFMOMA acquisitions more generously than the museum before.

Standout video

A standout in the category is Nicole Miller's "Unlabeled" (2011), four-minute video portrait of Cornel West. It stretches the bounds of portraiture in new and timely way. At 23-center West hangs apparently shot in a Manhattan 1950s domestic, with West leaning forward in the background, filling instantly on full and art.

Several times, including late now and then, that other windows displaying spots and music snippets flash but fade and fade here, as if they were evading the thoughts firing in West's head as he speaks.

The idea of portraiture as a matter of self-writing, becoming the recipient of the artist's culture, gets a thorough going-over in the work of Thomas, as by means of his elaborate, living-room-like installation and several carefully staged photographs.

His photographs, whatever of dignities of ethnicity, class and cultural context he chooses the idea — especially manifesting in the present context — that self-knowledge, self-presentation and self-promotion that may come subsequent.

reasonable works. Loren Simpson's cluster of photographs and framed text, like that of Carrie Mae Weems, represents a conceptual extension in "Portraits and Other Likenesses," though they demonstrate, like Glenn Ligon's suite of prints, that conceptual strategies need not drain "viewer's emotional investment."

Simpson's photographic and verbal focus on socks and neckties obligates them the viewer's or suture to the legible American history of foot-binding.

In his 1993 series of writings, Ligon ingeniously inserted himself into the typographic and rhetorical forms of 19th-century slave narrative fragments to evoke the fraught condition of being a gay black man in late 19th-century America.

The most direct and startling extension to living occurs in a work by Henry-Born Wapnicka, Her "High Chair and Strong Fruit" (2002), has a black ball of red white being above a wooden chair perched high on legs extended like those of a photographer's tripod. Through a hole in the chair's seat, drops of red wax and puddle on the floor, and a set of vertical allegory of the artist's signature implies in one's own or on traces of high and low and the textures, rural and otherwise, affected in excess.

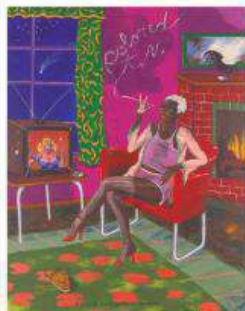
Work studying

"Portraits and Other Likenesses" got started with its MeAD and SFMOMA curators agreeing the artist's habitings of works by artists of the African diaspora. What has resulted is an exhibition of interest far beyond identity politics and historical necessity. While college courses might be devised to study logical cross-sections of the exhibition, and with any luck, some will be.

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"Unlabeled" (2011), a four-minute video portrait of Cornel West by Nicole Miller.

"Colored TV" (1972), left, is an acrylic on canvas by Robert Colescott.



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