

May 2015



Artists reimagine old forms and create new ones in two exhibitions on view this month.

“Sublimated Masks” at the Museum of Performance + Design features strikingly original hand-crafted costumes and fiber sculptures designed for a production of Jean Genet’s play “The Balcony,” while “Portraits and Other Likenesses from SFMOMA,” a collaborative venture with the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), displayed in MoAD’s recently renovated space, stretches the definition of portraiture.

The portrait exhibition’s 50 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed media and installation pieces, dating from the early 1930s to the present, are drawn from SFMOMA’s collection and relate to the African diaspora. But rather than faithfully documenting physical traits or evoking iconic individuals, many of the artists upend stereotypes and imbue their works with fantasy and fiction. “Personal identification is just the starting point,” says MoAD guest curator Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins in SFMOMA’s members’ magazine.

“A portrait can be as much about masquerade and invention as it is about physical description.” She might have been referencing Nick Cave’s “Soundsuit” (2009), one of a series of outrageous, wearable sculptures named for the noise they produce when worn. A Chicago-based artist with a background in fashion, Cave scavenged through thrift shops, remnant barrels and his relatives’ attics for materials to construct the ornate costumes that allowed him to be loud in a crowd and express himself without inhibition.

Though the show emphasizes the work of a younger generation of artists, it also pays homage to veterans such as Romare Bearden, whose large, vibrantly colored collage, “Three Men” (1966-67), depicts a trio of musicians delineated with abstract, fractured shapes. “Forever Free” (1933), an allegorical wood sculpture by Sargent Johnson, a prominent, early-20th-century San Francisco sculptor, shows a dignified black woman gazing reverently toward the heavens while protecting her two young children, whose likenesses are carved and painted on her skirt. The subversive Robert Colescott is represented by “Colored TV” (1977), an acrylic painting in which a cartoon-like black figure of indeterminate gender is seated in a bright red lounge chair, watching a buxom white woman cavort on television. At a time when African-Americans rarely saw their identities or lives reflected in the mass media, “Colescott came at social and political issues head on,” notes LeFalle-Collins. “He wasn’t afraid to be controversial or to confront people with their biases, politics or complacency.”

He pushed the envelope with respect to a certain style of confrontational presentation, opening the door to other artists such as Kara Walker, whose drawing here overtly critiques violence and displacement connected to the diaspora, and Mickalene Thomas, whose staged photograph “Sista Sista Lady Blue” (2007-08) explores black identity and perceptions of African-American beauty. In Thomas’ picture, a woman with an Afro, knee-high boots and a cool 1970s vibe sits on a living room couch. Staring intently, she seems to dare the viewer to meet her gaze.

Many artists in the exhibition question how far society has come in terms of race, class, gender and visibility, observes LeFalle-Collins. If there’s one thing this show demonstrates, she says, it’s that we need to keep asking that question. “Blacks are in the movies, on TV and hosting programs but underneath the veneer there’s still institutionalized racism in every walk of life and these artists know that.”

"Portraits and Other Likenesses
from SFMOMA"

May 8 → October 11

Museum of the African Diaspora

685 Mission St.

415/358-7200

<http://www.moadsf.org/>

<http://www.sfarts.org/feature.cfm?featureID=394&title=artists-explore-identity-through-portraits--masks>