

The New York Times

ART REVIEW; *Constructing Images Of the Black Male*
Michael Kimmelman
November 11, 1994

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Some people have even wondered aloud whether this is a subject for an art museum to deal with. The answer to that question, at least, is simple. Yes, it is. One thing the show underscores is that artists, black and white, have specifically addressed the topic of the black male, and the amount of art devoted to it grows. It's a rich, timely and complex vein for a museum interested in contemporary art.

Unfortunately, "Black Male" turns out to be not nearly so complex or provocative as the subject merits. There's plenty of work in it calculated to incite and enrage people, but much of it is the predictable inside-the-art-world-Beltway stuff that the Whitney, and countless SoHo galleries, have regularly been offering. Beyond that, there are challenging, sometimes moving works by artists like Adrian Piper, David Hammons, Robert Colescott, Leon Golub, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson and Barkley Hendricks: it would be wrong to think of the exhibition as just sensationalist. But the sum of what's on view is disappointing.

Why? The show is smaller than the buzz about it might lead people to expect. Works by 29 artists from the late 60's to the present are collected on one floor. (A film and video section is on another.) But physical size isn't a problem; it's a plus. The exhibition feels digestible: modest, almost.

The problem is the show is small in scope. Too much of it consists of the sort of uncharismatic objects ubiquitous in the art world today with meanings nearly impossible to decipher. Some of the works are so obscurantist they're prone to be misconstrued. Thelma Golden, the show's curator, writes in the catalogue that "media fascination around black masculinity is always concentrated in three areas: sex, crime and sports." But you can come away from the exhibition dispirited by the preponderance of art that seems to define the black man in just those terms while purporting to expose and debunk the stereotypes.

Thus you have works like Dawn DeDeaux's larger-than-life photograph of a young black man carrying a pistol and wearing a holster, with a piece of jewelry in the shape of a revolver around his neck. It's hard to discern the critical edge, if there is one, in posing him like Rambo. His shirtless, handsome, heroic image, ornamented with gold leaf, is hung from pipes and against a metal backdrop that suggest a shrine.

Likewise, the Nike poster called Moses, of the basketball star Moses Malone, which Jeff Koons has framed: will anyone see irony beyond what's in the poster already? Or what about Kevin Everson's photographs of unidentified black men, the photos framed and placed on a pair of roughly made end tables? The work by Mr. Everson, the catalogue reveals, is inspired by the predominantly black town of Mansfield, Ohio, where he's from. The biggest business there is the jail, and some workers at it also have relatives in it. Mr. Everson's subject is compelling and poignant, in fact, but you wouldn't know it from his deadpan sculptures. Evoking Mansfield through nondescript household furniture and vague photos falls visually flat.



It's not that art must be accessible. Some works in the show are too much so. Fred Wilson's all too familiar crew of headless black mannequins in museum guard uniforms is one example. Another is Carl Pope's installation: a shelf of trophies and a wall of plaques documenting the deaths of black men, like Michael Stewart, in encounters with the New York City police. Mr. Pope's obsessive production is impressive, to a point, but the work is an elaborate one-liner.

Art can be political and blunt, rebarbative even, and it's all right to force a viewer to jump through hoops to get its point. But only if the payoff in visual and intellectual terms is worthwhile. Good intentions aren't enough: Andres Serrano's big Cibachrome photographs of homeless men mean to lend the dignity of Old Master portraiture to their subjects, whom Mr. Serrano pays to photograph and allows to choose their own poses. But his bland pictures, with their blank faces and absent expressions, don't live up to the idea behind them.

There are works in the exhibition that have a certain poetry and subtlety. Lorna Simpson combines fragmentary texts with fragmentary photographs of a black man. The man is shown from the back, front and in profile, his arms akimbo, crossed and at his sides, his face cropped out of the pictures. Beneath the photos, text panels provide only partial views, too. "Work this week is temp," says one. "Sometimes Sam stands like his mother," says another. Ms. Simpson's cool, soft-spoken art manages to raise issues about constructing identity, forging links, making assumptions.

Carrie Mae Weems also combines text and image. Her fictionalized account of a relationship between a man and woman is interspersed with photographic tableaux of them at a kitchen table. Maybe what makes Ms. Weems's work stand apart, like Ms. Simpson's, is that it is so different from much of the rest of the show, which focuses on negative stereotypes. It's also the quietly ordinary, human story she tells, one involving both men and women.

Leon Golub's paintings of groups of black men are eloquent and open-ended in their own way. How you see his figures depends on what you bring to them. And even though Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of nude black men are tired warriors in the art world-real world struggles, it's fine that they're resurrected here. They epitomize a dilemma in the representation of black men: are the pictures erotic celebrations or exploitative and dehumanizing? How can you tell the difference? The photos leave the issue open.

Finally, Barkley Hendricks's paintings are as unfamiliar today as Mapplethorpe's works are familiar. Mr. Hendricks is represented by three crisply realist portraits from the 70's, handsome images that can bring to mind Sargent in the dignity and scale they lend to their subjects.

Their forthright depictions of black men are a high point of the show, and nothing else quite like them is in it. That fact raises a question: Was there nothing by Willie Birch, Benny Andrews, Faith Ringgold, Alice Neel, Romare Bearden, Kerry Marshall, Candace Hill, Jacob Lawrence -- forget artists like Thornton Dial who are relegated to the category of "outsiders" -- appropriate to an exhibition about contemporary images of black men? Clearly not to a show so slanted toward conceptual political work, as is this one (and its often polemical, jargony catalogue). Even an artist as up-to-the-minute as Lyle Ashton Harris is represented in a selective way, with only the sexually charged photographs of himself nude and in drag, not with a touching and more plain-spoken image by him of his grandfather.

The result? "Black Male" will almost certainly be remembered for the debates it provokes, which may be considerable and important. The Whitney is proud of the breadth of issues it tackles, and not altogether wrongly so. It's paradoxical, then, that with "Black Male," it succumbs to chic and narrow thinking.

"Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through March 5.



Weekend

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1994

The New York Times

C1

Susan Marshall Troupe (Dance Review, C3) 'The Santa Clause' (Film Review, C24)



★★★★ Dining On East Side (Review, C22)

The chef and owner of Manhattan's new four-star restaurant.

Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Farm Life of the 20's For Children of the 90's

By JO THOMAS

TOOK my two children to Muscoot Farm on a dreary Sunday in November, when the bored quarreling that begins on a day to be spent indoors sent me running for a map and extra sweat shirts and dry socks to stuff in a shopping bag. The farm, in the Westchester County town of Somers, is a long drive from our house in New Jersey, and there were moments, as we approached the Tappan Zee Bridge, when I had my doubts as the rain and the unseasonably warm temperature wrapped the car in a white haze. My daughters ate the Halloween candy they had brought and submerged themselves in headphones and the silence that usually means the crapping and Pink Floyd. But it was raining, and I was on the run from a Sunday indoors.



Interpreting the past on an autumn day at Muscoot.

"A farm?" Susan, 12, had asked in disbelief. In an instant, she remembered a major school project on Ulysses S. Grant that was due the next day. She didn't need a trip to a farm. She had to do her homework. "Do later," I told her. Kathleen, 7, was eager to go. In five minutes, she packed a raincoat, two soft drinks, candy, a large stack of story tapes, a camera, two books, crayons and a notebook. By the time we had turned north on Interstate 684, just outside White Plains, she was hungry. We stopped at the Friendly's in Mount Kisco, N.Y., for cheese sandwiches, pizza and ice cream cones, which turned out to be a good idea because the snack bar at the farm was closed. (There were picnic tables.) The restaurant was full of children and parents getting out of the house, and as we left, the rain was still beating down.

It wasn't until we had turned off the interstate and were driving south on Route 100 that the world flying past the windows caught my daughters' eyes, and we all saw it at the same time: a vast black lake and, in the distance, a white swan, like a vision from a fairy tale, swimming alone under a leaden sky. In a moment, we were past it and into the trees. "Did you see that?" asked Kathleen. "Did you see that?"

The lake is Muscoot Reservoir, part of the New York City system. It was on land owned by the Hopkins family for three generations. When New York City bought the land, the main farmhouse was moved several hundred yards to save it. In 1965, the family sold Muscoot Farm, 777 acres of farmland and forest, to Westchester County, and the farm's operation was taken over by the Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation.

Muscoot Farm is an "interpretive farm," the brochures explain. You can't feed or touch the animals. It is not, a multitude of signs repeat, a petting zoo. When my daughters were small, we visited a few commercial petting zoos. The animals were usually goats or deer, and the children loved touching them. But the sale of feed paid the bills in these places, and the animals always looked stuffed and torpid. After a few visits, we avoided petting zoos.

The Muscoot Farm brochure promised farm life "as it would have been lived in the 1920's." I wondered how I didn't want animation or characters from costume shops. We passed a large white Colonial Revival house with white columns, as beautiful as anything in a movie, and turned into the parking lot. The rain was now a fine mist, we avoided petting zoos.

Continued on Page C7

Powerful and without regret: Kirsten Dunst and Tom Cruise as otherworldly killers.

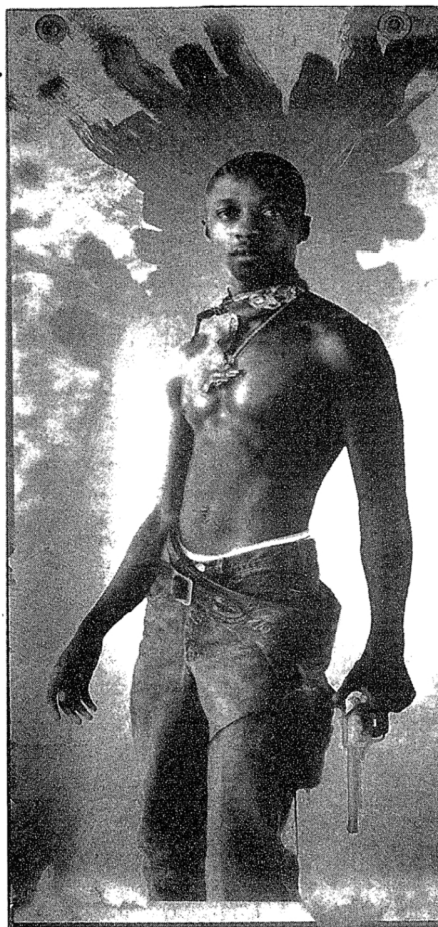


François Dubanel/Warner Brothers

ART REVIEW

Constructing Images Of the Black Male

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN



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This you have works like Dawn

Continued on Page C7

Role-playing: "Rambo," by Dawn DeDeaux, at the Whitney.

FILM REVIEW

Rapture and Terror, Bound by Blood

By JANET MASLIN

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

EROTICISM bubbles beneath the surface of every vampire story, but Anne Rice is a writer to make the pot boil. Ms. Rice's bohemian blend of pre-1920s, swooning seduction and avidly sensual horror has brought strikingly contemporary nuances to the vampire genre, infusing it with the literary equivalent of new blood. Her dense, suffocating novels have done as much to plumb old mysteries of the occult as to create new ones atop the best-seller list — but that's another story.

Ms. Rice once insisted publicly that her heady brew could not possibly be captured on film, at least not in a film directed by Neil Jordan and starring a noted nonvampire like Tom Cruise. Now rightfully eating

her hat over such pronouncements, she ought to be the most appreciative viewer that Mr. Jordan's "Interview With the Vampire" has. His sumptuous film is as strange and mesmerizing as it is imaginatively ghastly. It's a sophisticated, spookily intense rendering of Ms. Rice's story.

This film is so faithful that during an unusually gruesome season for mainstream movies, "Interview With the Vampire" will strike the hottest sparks of controversy. No less an arbiter of popular tastes than Oprah Winfrey has conspicuously walked out of a screening, even if it could be argued that this film is hardly more sickening than the routine content of daytime talk shows.

But as Ms. Rice's readers know, "Interview With the Vampire" is strong stuff. Bloodletting, wanton cruelty, innocent victims, even the sight of Mr. Cruise sinking his teeth heartily into a rat. In terms of flouting middle-of-the-

Continued on Page C29

Constructing Images of the Black Male

Continued From Page C1

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Likewise, the Nike poster called Moses, of the basketball star Moses Malone, which Jeff Koons has framed: will anyone see irony beyond what's in the poster already? Or what about Kevin Everson's photographs of unidentified black men, the photos framed and placed on a pair of roughly made end tables? The work by Mr. Everson, the catalogue reveals, is inspired by the predominantly black town of Mansfield, Ohio, where he's from. The biggest business there is the jail, and some workers at it also have end tables. Mr. Everson's subject is compelling and poignant, in fact, but you wouldn't know it from his delectable pictures. Evoking Mansfield through nondescript household furniture and vague photos falls visually flat.

It's not that art must be accessible. Some works in the show are too much so. Fred Wilson's all too familiar crew of headless black mannequins in museum guard uniforms is one example. Another is Carl Pope's installation: a shelf of trophies and a wall of plaques documenting the deaths of black men like Michael Stewart, in encounters with the New York City police. Mr. Pope's obsessive production is impressive, to a point, but the work is an elaborate one-liner.

Art can be political and blunt, reparative even, and it's all right to force a viewer to jump through hoops to get its message. But the payoff in visual and intellectual terms is worthwhile. Good intentions aren't enough. Artists have to be. Cibachrome photographs of homeless men mean to lend the dignity of Old Master portraits to the subjects, whom Mr. Serrano pays to photograph and allows to choose

their own poses. But his bland pictures, with their blank faces and almost imperceptible, don't live up to the idea behind them.

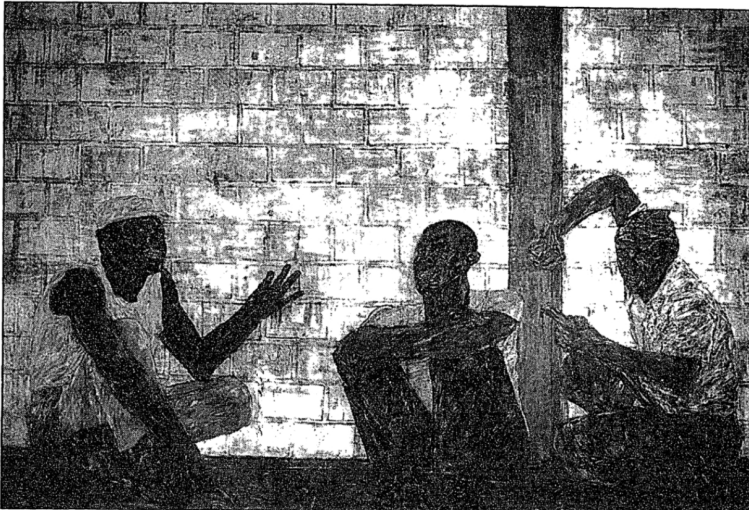
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Finally, Barkley Hendricks's paintings are as unfamiliar today as Mapplethorpe's works are familiar. Mr. Hendricks is represented by three crisp realist portraits from the 1960s, minimalist in their clarity and scale they lend to their subjects.

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"Three Seated Black Men" (1986), a painting by Leon Golub, is in the exhibition "Black Male" at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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Farm Life of the 20's, Interpreted for Children of the 90's

Continued From Page C1

but there were only a few cars. No out-of-state license plates. No visitors in sight. There was a World War I exhibition in the main house, but the girls had already spotted the animals, so we walked toward a cluster of outbuildings, some dark red and some white. A long-haired farm cat, gray with touches of rufous, was curled up in a bed of red geraniums. My daughters made a dash for a pen of geese and ducks, but I stopped and looked at the colors of the cat and the geraniums, realizing for the first time that we hadn't yet seen a frost this season.

The ducks were asleep, their heads tucked back under their feathers. Kathleen tried twisting her own head back, then gave up. "It'd be hard to sleep like this," she said. "Look!" Susan said. "The geese are standing on one foot." The geese ignored us, but the turkeys didn't. They were in a shed behind the barn. They showed off, fluffing out their black feathers like dancers. It was the first time we'd seen turkeys that weren't in a frozen-food case, and they didn't go "Gobble, gobble" as they do in books. They made a whistling sound, a kind of begging noise that made us sad.

"Their faces look all wary?" said Susan. "Why are they so ugly?" asked Kathleen.

Farm-Style Amenities

We looked at the obvious things: the cows in the pasture, the sheep and pigs in the barn, a long white grape arbor led from the mainhouse



Counting sheep: A visitor outside the barns last weekend at Muscoot Farm in Somers, N.Y.

to an outhouse, a four-and-a-half-holer, the brochure explained. We skipped the trip inside. I asked Kathleen what she would do if she had to make her way through such an arbor in the middle of the night.

"I'd ask my parents to build a bathroom," she said.

We were still in 1994. There was a horse barn, with two large box stalls and an array of harnesses. The girls, who love horses, stood in the rackpacked in terror as a flock of small birds whizzed out of the dark loft above their heads. The horses, as brown as the muddy paddock, were outside, along with an elegant pair of mules,

both dapple gray. In good weather, the mules pull hayrides. But the farm roads were full of puddles, and the mules kept a good distance from the visitors, wagging their ears but refusing my daughters' entreaties to come closer.

Wild and Otherwise

Muscoot Farm is surrounded by steep hills, supplemented now with white board and wire fences. In the 1920's, although the Hopkins family used cars for transportation, draft horses were still used for plowing. The tractors couldn't fit through the openings in the stone walls.

"They were hand-laid, in my mother's time," said Charlie Bassett, who said his grandfather was the superintendent of the farm for 40 years. Mr. Bassett, 47, worked on the farm as a young man and was paying a visit to the blacksmith shop when Kathleen picked up a black heifer from the cold furnace and asked him, "Is this real coal?" Mr. Bassett seemed happy to explain that it was.

A sign outside said Jasper Booth, a blacksmith had lived and worked at Muscoot Farm for most of his life, shoeing horses and making tools. "He made the hinges," Mr. Bassett said. "He made the shovels."

Clearly, he was a good source. Susan and Kathleen asked if he could get them into the modern milk house. They had visited the old milk house. A sign there explained that in the days before electrification, cans of milk were cooled in cement troughs of ice water until they could be taken by draft horses to the depot at Whitehall Corners, a mile and a

half away. But the girls were too short to look in the windows, so they tried the latch and the door opened. Inside, the room was bare and a little dusty, but they could see the troughs. They had no such luck at the modern milk house. It was locked.

No, Mr. Bassett couldn't let them in, but he could show them the pond where ducks of ice were cut in winter, then taken to the ice house and covered with sawdust and straw to keep it well into the summer. Susan asked for the car keys to get her Walkman. She could catch up with us later.

We walked through the barns and out toward the fields, with Kathleen skidding through the mud, her battered tennis shoes turning black. We passed giant trees, leafless but labeled so we wouldn't mistake them even in winter: a majestic white oak, a red maple, a shagbark hickory tree. I was beginning to realize, with relief, that no one was selling anything here. There was nothing to buy.

"When the farmer is through, the developer comes in," Mr. Bassett said, waving his arm at the hills, the pastures and the olive orchard. "If the country didn't get it, this'd be all houses."

beyond a wooden dock that had a single bench. Not a bird. Not a sound. The afternoon was fading: it was 2:30, and we hadn't seen the main house yet. The exhibition there closed at 3. We walked back, Susan met us at the entrance to the barnyard.

The World War I exhibition had been set up in the drawing room. It was an old-fashioned display, with uniforms and medals and letters were laid on tables, and a small crowd stood talking quietly. Kathleen picked up one of the pistols lying next to a hand grenade.

"Put that down!" I hissed, grabbing it from her. It was heavy and old. Nobody seemed to mind that we had touched it. Kathleen fingered an old medal hanging from a uniform. "It's very pretty," she said.

Only the first floor of the house is open to the public, and only on weekends, but it's worth the trip to see the house alone. It is furnished with antiques that would crowd a lesser house, with fireplaces, with lace curtains and glassed-in bookcases. The girls quickly lost interest in the furnishings, but Susan stopped to watch three great washbasins and some washboards, hanging on a nearby wall. There were no smells of a farm kitchen, only the pale light falling through blue gingham curtains and a group of children trading drawings, but it was not hard to imagine the tremendous labor it had taken to keep such a farm going.

The tools were in a building out back, there are trails through a blacksmithing class, lessons in making bread-dough vegetables and fruits for a Thanksgiving cornucopia, or a demonstration of how to make a gingerbread house. A few make pre-registration or a small fee. Admission to the farm is free, so we left a donation for animal food.

On festival days, Mr. Bassett told us, there are huge crowds. We hope to go back for one of those. But on Muscoot Farm it will be hard to beat a Sunday in late autumn when little more than the rain is going on.



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For Another Time

It was beginning to get dark. We sat on the pier and looked at the gray sky and the black water. "Do you know fish like ice cream?" Susan asked. "I went fishing once, and I dropped my cone." The farm would close at 4 P.M. No one wanted to leave.

We promised we would come back. There are trails through a blacksmithing class, lessons in making bread-dough vegetables and fruits for a Thanksgiving cornucopia, or a demonstration of how to make a gingerbread house. A few make pre-registration or a small fee. Admission to the farm is free, so we left a donation for animal food.

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Visiting Muscoot Farm

Muscoot Farm is on Route 100 in Somers, N.Y. It is open from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. daily year-round except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

To reach the farm from Manhattan, take the Hutchinson River Parkway to Interstate 84 North. Take 84 to Route 35 (exit 8) and turn left onto Route 35 West. Continue to Route 100. Turn left onto Route 100 South, and continue for a little more than a mile. The entrance to the farm is on the right.

In addition to buildings dating from the 1800's (some filled with antiques), the trails on the farm's 777 acres, a display of tools and machinery, and the ani-

mals that roam the property, there are usually special activities on Sundays from 1 to 3 P.M. This Sunday, traditional crafts like smoking, quilting, spinning and weaving will be demonstrated. On Nov. 20, children can make cornucopias. On Nov. 27, there will be a demonstration of making a gingerbread house. All three are free. At various times, there are also classes in other crafts, like blacksmithing, which require payment and pre-registration.

Admission to the farm is free for individuals, and families of larger groups pay a fee and need to pre-register for special activities. Information: (914) 332-7118.

A Peek Inside

The pond was silver, surrounded by woods, silent, empty, shimmering



Bill Molens in a blacksmithing workshop at Muscoot Farm.