



ARTFORUM

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Terry Adkins

AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME

Terry Adkins's "Meteor Stream," the culmination of a ten-year cycle on abolitionist John Brown, opened on the 150th anniversary of Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry—his legendary attempt to seize a government arsenal and initiate a slave revolt, the failure of which led to his hanging. From the John Brown House, in Akron, Ohio, the exhibition sequence moved across the United States via places associated with Brown's life. In each location, Adkins collaborated with members of the local community and incorporated newly found objects into the installations, referencing the influence of context and time—and hence the element of serendipity—on the judgment of actions, the writing of history. Indeed, wouldn't this deeply religious nineteenth-century folk hero be seen as a fundamentalist terrorist today?

The gallery space was the container for healing recitals in which the artist inhabited Brown's spirit to reconstruct, and commemorate, the account. The first of two rooms evoked both chapel and tomb with a symmetrical arrangement of sculpture, drawings, and artifacts. On a stand framed by an apselike window was a book posing as the Bible: It

contained a famous 1881 speech by Frederick Douglass, proclaiming Brown a martyr to the cause of liberty. An ecclesiastical vestment dangled over a casketlike glass case, which contained four suspended layers of delicate white starfish, echoing the heavens and the flight of birds—or freed souls—out of a tree in the nearby video *Roost*, 2001, in which Adkins embodies Brown's ghost standing on the banks of Lake Alice, in Gainesville, Florida, where the artist imagined the revolt, if successful, would have claimed victory. Another video projected from the same altarlike monitor, *Apis Mellifera*, 1999, was a triptych with a buzzing image of hiving bees—*bees* was the code word for the Harpers Ferry mission—framed by those of the mouths of two men, one white and one black. Propped like regimented soldiers in racks on either side of the room were twenty-two replicas of the spears used in the insurrection, representing the number of men who took part.

Loud and clear in the next room were two giant black-and-white banners proclaiming *A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY*, replicas of one that hung outside the headquarters of the NAACP in New York in the 1930s. These two exclamation marks intensified the visceral sensation created by shamanistic objects such as *Tupelo*, 2009, a shrunken black head teetering atop a tenuous pole, and *Redeemer*, 2009, a tiny drum from which hangs a small white parachute filled with black rooster feathers. Two deceptively inconsequential-looking documents on the wall bore equally foreboding messages: a proclamation warning people away from the scene of the execution and a statement in Brown's handwriting predicting that only bloodshed would wash away the "crimes of this guilty land."

The exhibition (or, as Adkins calls it, the recital) amounted to a multilayered testimonial—as intuitive and precise as it was gut-wrenching and informative—that compressed time and integrated historical events and otherworldly meanings. Even the setting, the American Academy in Rome, evoked the importance of happenstance in historical narrative: Among other uncanny coincidences, the architect of the building, Charles McKim, was the son of abolitionists who attended Brown's execution and aided his widow in claiming his body and giving him a proper burial.

To conclude the exhibition, the charismatic artist led a powerful evangelistic performance of music, song, and spoken word involving musicians and writers from the American Academy. Serving as a cathartic coda to the entire project cycle, this "Hiving Bee" finally laid Brown's restless soul, if not his legacy, to rest.

—Cathryn Drake

Terry Adkins, *Meteor Stream—Recital in Four Dominions—After John Brown, Recital View*, 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable.

