

Art in America, March 2014



## TERRY ADKINS

### Salon 94

The objective of “Nenuphar,” an exhibition by Terry Adkins mounted at both of Salon 94’s downtown galleries, was to illuminate similarities between two very different men: Yves Klein, the French *Nouveau Réaliste*, and the American George Washington Carver, who was born a slave but went on to become a renowned agricultural chemist, inventor and educator, as well as musician, painter and creator of dyes and pigments. Adkins largely failed to identify any you’ve-got-to-be-kidding likenesses, save for both men’s “invention” of a shade of blue, which Klein registered as a trademark roughly two decades after Carver had developed its near equivalent. But that failure mattered little. Adkins’s extensive historical research revealed loose connections related to botany, music and the nautical, but more importantly his linking of the two men resulted in some arresting works that sparked a satisfying frisson. There was no need for conceptual buttressing.

“Nenuphar”—a word derived from the medieval Latin for water lily—included a black-and-white digital video animating shifting stereoscopic images of flowered wreaths, crosses and other objects; inkjet prints of faux-historical book folios that

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reimagine Carver as the creator of a series of Kleinesque monochromes; and a group of watercolors in which Adkins used the Carver-Klein blue to redact portions of 18th-century botanical illustrations. But the show's strength lay in the rich associations conjured by 16 sculptures, which relate both to the lineage of Joseph Beuys in their layering of meaning and metaphor, and, in their psychologically charged formalism, to work by Adkins's near-contemporary Martin Puryear.

*Methane Sea* (2013) consists of a tangle of thick ropes slung over a metal armature festooned with wooden fids (conical tools used on boats to work with rope and canvas). Suggesting the form of a horse or ox, the sculpture recalls *The Pack* (1969), in which Joseph Beuys created a "pack" of felt-and-fat-laden sleds emerging from a VW van. In *Upperville* (2009), a shock of African porcupine quills sprouting from a small concrete block and placed alongside a messier pile of smaller quills is uncannily similar to the grassy forms of Puryear's later *Night Watch* (2012).

Most impressive was *Smoke Signal* (2013), a towering stack of Eames chair bases studded with ebony tuning pins and draped in leather fly sheets, garments traditionally used to protect horses from insects but which here evoke a Native American breastplate. The work's height of 190 inches was meant to symbolically reference Klein's infamous *Leap into the Void* (1960), a photomontage in which Klein was shown jumping from a second-story window. Adkins's sculpture combines the elegant thrust of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* and the strangeness of Brian Jungen's whale skeletons made of plastic lawn chairs.

Adkins refers to his repurposing of found materials as a process of "potential disclosure," and through their recontextualization many of the objects take on new identities. A stained lithograph stone standing upright resembles a

weathered headstone; lace draped over a drum practice-pad stand suggests a petticoat. Roland Barthes defined myth as a "game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form" and saw it as a tool used to reify the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. Adkins's work engages a similar game, though marshaled to entirely different ends, opening a space of improvisatory association replete with possibility.

—Casey Ruble