The Ship’s Inventory: A Book Talk on Voyage of the Sable Venus

Simone Gulliver, 5/4
Lewis

Robin Coste Lewis, photo via CommonPlace Podcast: Conversations with Poets
Prologue:

What follows is a narrative poem comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present.

The formal rules I set for myself were simple:

1. No title could be broken or changed in any way. Where the grammar is completely modified—I created all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not systematically annotated, edited, or fragmented.

2. "Art" included paintings, sculpture, installations, photography, lithographs, engravings, any work on paper, or in other—old or new—traditional mediums now recognized by the Western art-historical canon. However, because black female figures were also used in ways I could never have anticipated, I was forced to expand that definition to include other material and visual objects, such as combos, spools, buckles, pins, boxes, table legs.

3. As some points, I realized that museums and libraries (as to what I imagine must have been either a hard-won gesture of goodwill, or in order not to appear irreverent) had removed many nineteenth-century historically specific markers—such as class, gender, and race—from their titles or archives, and replaced those words stamped with the sanitized, but perhaps equally tautological Africentricism. In order to unfold this historical covers of slavery (however well intended), I re-created the potter's Africentric, that changed those titles back. That is, I re-recovery the corrected horror in order to allow that original horror to stand. My intent was to explore and record not only the history of human thought, but also the normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been in participating in—if not creating—the history.

4. As an homage, I decided to include titles of art by black women creators and artists, whether the art included a black female figure or not. Most of this work was created over the last century, with its deepest saturation occurring since the Cold War. I also included work by black women artists, regardless of gender, because this body of work has made consistently some of the richest, most elegant, least pretentious contributions to Western art intergenrations of gender and race.
Venus


“Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world. The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon’s laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master’s bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus.”

- Saidiya Hartman, Venus in Two Acts
The Archive
“Just off, just to the edge, just beneath: pieces of Black female bodies buried in plain sight. Black female bodies ornamenting the tripods, the base of a table, sleeping inside the frame, selling, offering, tending in the background of innumerable paintings ...Every continent, every country, every time period, every museum, every exhibit, every gallery, every library, every archive, every repository, every court. We were everywhere.”

Lewis, "Broken, Defaced, Unseen"
“I tried “to write about it.” I tried to write something else… I tried to write about the hysterical laughter that would project from my mouth in the middle of the night as I discovered yet another unbelievably heinous art object, so sick the modern mind could have never conceived of it.

Each time I tried to write about the art itself, I would find yet another image or object whose title, shockingly, could say more about human beings in a few words than any writer or artist could accomplish in a million pages, with a million images.”

Lewis, "Broken, Defaced, Unseen"
Robert Cottingham, Black Girl, 1980, Thirty two color lithograph on BFK Rives paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin
Part 1: Free Write
“half-length image
of a Young Negro Woman
Wearing a Dress with an
Empire.

Waistline and pearl
earrings and a necklace,
and holding
a basket of flowers over her
left arm, painting.”

“The Slaves escaping through
the swamp.”

“The Black Girl from the
Cottingham Suite”

“Alabama Sketchbook:
Seated Negro Woman Looking
To the left, drawing.”
“half-length image
of a Young Negro Woman
Wearing a Dress with an
Empire.
Waistline and pearl
earrings and a necklace, and
holding
a basket of flowers over her left
arm, painting.”

“The Slaves escaping through
the swamp,”

“Black Girl from the Cottingham
Suite”

“Alabama Sketchbook:
Seated Negro Woman Looking
To the left, drawing.”

Anthony Meucci, Euphemia Toussaint, 1825. Watercolor on

Robert Cottingham, Black Girl, 1980, Thirty two color
lithograph on BFK Rives paper. Smart Museum of Art,
The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

George Fuller, “Grace,” 1857. Detail of sketchbook page. Private
collection. Reproduced in Sarah Burns’ “Images of Slavery: George
Fuller's Depictions of the Antebellum South.”
Part 2: The Voyage
In the poem’s epilogue, Lewis positions herself as a collector of the Black women she encounters in museum archives.

“My duty was to find them, to find each one, to bring the broken bodies aboard [my ship]…I’d write down the title in my notebook, bring her aboard, wrap her in blankets, clothe and feed her. By the end, the ship was full.”

And yet, she conceals these artworks from her audience. What does this strategy of concealment accomplish within the text?
“Could it be, I wondered, that, instead of the intellectual propaganda we call “history,” the more honest, simple, and accurate narrative of art, of perception, was hiding right there in plain view—not, however, in the imagery but simply in what the image is called, within the signs, within the words… The art challenged me to stop speaking. **The titles were adamant that our opinions and theories about art were wholly unnecessary.**”

Examine the above passage. Why does Lewis look to words rather than images to engage Black women’s archives?
Close read the image on view. Focus on its artistic elements - color, texture, composition, medium - rather than simply its thematic implications. What do you see?
Figure 1: Robert Cottingham, Star, 1977, Etching and aquatint on AP etching paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

Figure 2: Robert Cottingham, Carl's, 1977, Etching and aquatint on paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

Figure 3: Robert Cottingham, Black Girl, 1980, Thirty two color lithograph on BFK Rives paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

Figure 4: Robert Cottingham, Hamburgers, 1980, Color lithograph on BFK Rives paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth275596/
1. How does “Black Girl” align with or differ from the other lithographs in Cottingham’s suite? What does this artwork reveal about how Black women are culturally consumed? Where do Black women fit within Cottingham’s lexicon of Americana?

1. Though some of Lewis’s stanzas refer to portraits of real women, the “Black Girl” (and the “Butcher) in this artwork are ultimately Cottingham’s own constructions. In the absence of real bodies to map onto this artwork, who is Cottingham’s Black Girl and who is his butcher?
Robert Cottingham, Black Girl, 1980, Thirty two color lithograph on BFK Rives paper. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Allan Frumkin

Thank You!