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Todd Gray, "Rome Work"

by Jody Zellen

Vielmetter, Los Angeles, California
Continuing through January 13, 2024



Todd Gray, "Rome Work (Niobe and Her Children)," 2023, archive pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate, 45 x 108 x 4 3/4"

The current exhibition featuring Los Angeles-based photographer Todd Gray is comprised of work made during a 2022-23 residency at the American Academy in Rome. "Rome Work" features images of iconic architecture, statues and churches in Rome combined with images from previous bodies of work, some shot in Ghana, others a selection of self-portraits, many of which depict the artist's head covered with swaths of white shaving cream. Gray is a master of juxtaposition and has devised a way to creatively layer his images, encasing each element in its own (glassless), often oval frame so the finished works have dimensionality.

This is most evident in the large-scale floor-based group of images, "Rome Work (San Giovanni in Laterano, Goree Island, Senegal:Palace of Fontainebleau, Salaga)." Here, Gray combines a photograph of the facade of San Giovanni in Laterano, the oldest public church in Rome, with a contemporary image of people at the shore on Goree Island in Senegal (known for its role in the 15th-19th century Atlantic slave trade). Both of these photographs are partially obscured by a large oval picture frame filled with a dark silhouette of the artist shot from behind.

These three images comprise one side of the work and they lean against a smaller set of photographs like a sandwich board. On the verso, Gray presents an oval-shaped reproduction of a religious painting depicting God and angels from the Palace of Fontainebleau in Paris. It's as if it were suspended in front of a tree surrounded by bricks in a public square in Salaga, Ghana. Leaning against the tree is a mangled sign that reads "Welcome to Salaga Slave Market," which was the region's largest slave market. People were bought, sold, or traded for cattle in the 18th and 19th centuries.



Todd Gray, "On Pointe (Grotesques)," 2023, archive pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate, 46 5/8 x 34 1/2 x 3"

Gray layers people and places to create a trajectory through cultures and histories that, to quote Gray, "explore[s] the diasporic dislocations and cultural connections which link Western hegemony with West Africa." In these works, he alludes to historical and geographical racism and oppression. While his works are formally elegant and conceptually astute, they are also quite personal as he delves into his own image archives — Gray worked as a commercial photographer early in his career and was even Michael Jackson's official photographer in the early 1980s.

"On Pointe (Grotesques)" includes a cropped image of Michael Jackson's feet dancing on stage, his shoes on pointe, partially covered by a photograph of Gray's head and face grotesquely slathered with white shaving cream so his head resembles that of an animal. Both these framed images sit atop a photograph of an ornately painted church ceiling filled with monsters and animals.



Todd Gray, "Triple Play," 2023, archive pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate, 43 1/8 x 69 1/8 x 2 1/4"

"Rome Work (Niobe and her Children)" is a long horizontal photograph that spans nine feet across. The base images are two closely cropped color photographs of sculptures of Niobe and her children which are on display in the gardens at the Villa Medici in Rome. In Gray's collage, he overlays a tondo self-portrait in silhouette that mirrors the gestures of some of the sculptured figures. In "Triple Play," he also connects past and present by inserting three gold framed, oval photographs of his shaving cream covered face held aloft by various attendant putti on a wall with gold trimmed architectural details — as if to say I belong here, too.



Todd Gray, "Rome Work (San Giovanni in Laterano, Goree Island, Senegal:Palace of Fontainebleau, Salaga)," 2023, archive pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate, 59 1/2 x 68 x 43"

In his "Rome" series, Gray beautifully brings together photographs of the Eternal City that speak to darker times, wealth and poverty, construction and destruction. While Rome is a city full of ruins, Gray injects new life into his depictions. His images are an attempt to weave a path through different periods in history as a way to suggest that the evils of the past connect to the present. His evocative and thoughtful juxtapositions combine art, architecture with personal imagery to create new Black narratives that expose and explore legacies of colonialism in Africa and beyond.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com.