



Nikita Gale at Reginald Ingraham Gallery by Jody Zellen

In "1961," Atlanta-based artist Nikita Gale uses strategies of appropriation similar to those first employed by artists working in the 1960s, combining images and texts culled from disparate sources, creating new meaning through juxtaposition. That the exhibition opens with a textual triptych links her to conceptualism. In the tradition of conceptual arts' adaptation of concrete poetry, Gale reconfigures a racist letter from the grand wizard of the KKK to Malcolm X, first alphabetizing the words from A to Z, then re-arranging the contents letter by letter, and finally creating a composition with no words at all, only the original punctuation. She obscures the intent of the message in favor of an alphabetical hierarchy. Phrases from this letter are also used as poetic captions in her collages throughout the gallery, further obfuscating their original meaning and intent.

Elegantly installed as a narrative across the gallery walls, each diptych juxtaposes B&W mug shots of Freedom Riders (civil rights activists culled from the state archives in Mississippi), with a colorful snapshot of middle class whites (originally Kodachrome slides found in an antique store in White County, Georgia). Divergent histories are revealed through this coupling. Gale asks us to look at each element separately and to put the pieces of the puzzle together. In Gale's carefully constructed tabletop setup, the mug shots are photographed in small stacks, casually leaning against a wall. Some of these photographs have been cut apart and overlaid with the facial features from other mug shots creating a multi-racial collage. These black-and-white images are paired with a photograph (originally a Kodachrome slide) depicting white men, women and children engaging in leisure activities: swimming, picnics, cheerleading, boating. Below these images are snippets of text carefully culled from the grand wizard's letter.

The caption, "your motion prevailed under certain circumstances," appears below an image of cheerleaders dancing on a green field. The text accompanying two people sitting in the sand reads, "It will be easier because you will never surrender." What otherwise might be construed as benign leisure is suddenly undermined. Similarly, text that might have read as poetic is suddenly charged. By compositing images imbued with specific histories and through clever recontextualizing of personal and political images, Gale anchors the works in the political while simultaneously highlighting the racism prevalent in 1961. The collages function as archaeological excavations that beg to be deciphered. As each layer is stripped away, history is revealed, and new meanings are constructed.