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Kara Walker, "Bureau of Refugees: March - Bradley killed freedwoman with an axe in Montgy," 2007

Connecting the dots

Kara Walker's reconstructions and Mark Booth's maps of the senses

NEW WORK

Kara Walker
Through November 21
Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
530 West 22nd Street
(212-929-2262,
galler@sikkemjenkinsco.com)

SUDDENLY ONE OF THE
CARROTS ASKED, "WHAT IS
CRIME?"

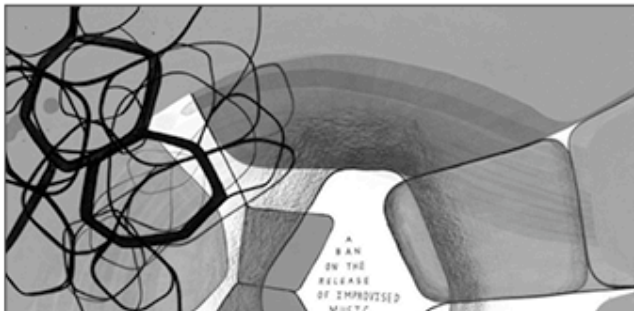
Mark Booth
Through December 19
Hudson Franklin
508 West 26th Street
(212-741-1189,
husdonfranklin.com)

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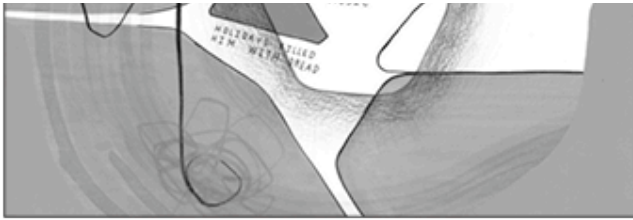
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By Debra Jenks

Kara Walker's show at Sikkema Jenkins opened in conjunction with her current retrospective "My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," at the Whitney Museum. Missing from the Chelsea show are her trademark panoramic tableaus with cut paper silhouettes, based on themes from



Mark Booth, "Improvised Music"

Courtesy the artist and Hudson Franklin, New York

popular novels like "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Gone with the Wind." The show offers instead an assortment of framed paper cutouts and mixed-media paintings from two distinct series of works.

The first group of images are from a series titled "Bureau of Refugees,

Freedmen and Abandoned Lands- Records, 'Miscellaneous Papers' National Archives M809 Roll 23." Unlike her previous life-size cast of characters, these images illustrate actual accounts of atrocities perpetrated on freed slaves, from the records of the Freedman's Bureau. The delicacy of these small paper silhouettes is a sharp contrast to their grotesque content. In "Bureau of Refugees: Freedwoman brought to the hospital shot through the head by unknown parties" we see two barely visible figures on a dark ground carrying off a third figure with a tiny hole cut out. Another, "Mulatto hung by a grape vine near road side between Tuscaloosa & Greensboro," shows an upside down figure entangled in vines, and "Bradley killed Freedwoman with an axe" depicts a woman in a hoopskirt with an axe partially hidden behind her, sitting above a group of severed heads.

"Search For Ideas Supporting The Black Man As A Work of Modern Art/Contemporary Painting: A Death Without End, And An Appreciation Of The Creative Spirit Of Lynch Mobs" is the second set of works in the show. The series consists of 52 handwritten texts in a graffiti script, hung together in a grid, beginning with the phrase "A Painting is a Nigger, an object without use value." Use value is a concept from Karl Marx's "Das Kapital," and can be thought of as "the utility of a thing" or a product's ability to fill a social need. There's an intentional juxtaposition of the present with the antebellum past in this work. Passages like "Pile of naked prisoners asses in pyramids of simulated group sex because pyramid of real sex would have started a riot," and "no hanging bodies swinging from grapevines nor beheaded industrialist's private operators burned beyond recognition," fast forward us from the violence on the plantation to the war in Iraq and torture at Abu Ghraib. Walker forces us to connect the dots.

Accompanying the text pieces are several large mixed-media paintings on panels that seem to parody Cubist motifs or Modernist painting. In "Authenticating the Artifact" we see another hoop-skirted lady holding up a skull as if to study it. The silhouette is placed on a painted ground of angular plains that resemble harlequin patterns or crazy quilts. The image suggests Walker's own examination and deconstruction of racist stereotypes.

"Reconstruction" is an assemblage of cut black paper and cardboard silhouettes with newsprint. There's the head of Abraham Lincoln, a cardboard profile with fluting that looks like Ben Franklin and a Chinese paper-cut in the shape of a heart, floating off-center. There's no sequence here or story to follow. The pieces feel stuck and we get caught in the busy-ness of the work. The painting's title refers to the period after the Civil War, the same period the Freedman's Bureau was founded. Reconstruction, in this instance, might also insinuate Walker's own state of being in transition, her "search for ideas" or a direction that continues to put the "use value" back in art.

If you're looking for some comic relief, see Mark Booth's show at Hudson Franklin, where nature and culture butt heads in a battle of the senses. Booth is a multi-media artist from Chicago working in painting, text and sound. His show presents a voluminous array of small paintings on paper and two of the artist's audio works.

Part concrete poetry, part automatic drawing, the work brings to mind the continuous line of a Brice Marden painting, mechanical scribbles from a polygraph machine or word maps.

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In some instances his abstract cells slip into the realm of landscape. There's a spontaneity and quirkiness in his "involuntary" speech and slips-of-the-tongue, like "Sleight of Gland" and "i need spelling salts," and in his mix-and-match organization of information. The text is often arranged in circular patterns, so there's no indication of a starting or ending point. We can't read the sentences in a linear manner, so we have to construct our own order.

Booth is tuned into the glossolalia of everyday language, whether it's snippets of overheard conversation or the incessant shifting of his own thoughts, where, as he writes in his drawings, "mists overlap" and "emotional particles waft invisibly in air."

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