



# Transitions: States of Being

Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, GA

Ivory, imperialism, and contemporary art collide in thoughtful and often troubling ways in *Transitions: States of Being* [September 10–December 4, 2016] at the Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University, in which nine artists question and explore context, perspective, and dominant ideologies through film, photography, sculpture, and taxidermy.

At the heart of *Transitions* is a collection of Mangbetu and Azande ivories sculpted by unattributed Congolese artists during the early 20th century to cater to the tastes of European tourists and hunters. These particular ivories were collected by Dimitri Ziros and later gifted to the Zuckerman Museum by his grandson and KSU Professor Emeritus Apostolos Ziros. Beginning as souvenirs and later appearing as artifacts, the use of ivories today in exhibitions and museums is highly controversial. The ZMA is quick to acknowledge the problematic nature of displaying these objects, and the exhibition begins with a lengthy wall text on how they serve to educate the public on Congolese culture, on its exploitation, and on recent environmental conservation efforts. “It is the underlying tensions and history of these objects in addition to their shifts in meaning and status,” states the exhibition catalogue, “that provide avenues into the contemporary [artists’] work in this exhibition.”

In order to get to the first part of *Transitions* in the East Gallery, you must first walk through *Sleight of Hand*. This small exhibit includes a series of 19th-century collotype postcards showing dramatically staged scenes of colonial-era Congo, with titles such as “Virgin for Sale,” all made with the intent of validating colonial exploitation and, according to the wall text, catering to the “European Male Prowess.” Although hard to stomach, the postcards are important in providing strong evidence of the commoditization of the Congo for European consumption. The long-lasting effects of this commoditization are displayed on the opposing wall, where *Iyeza* (2012), a video work by Zimbabwean artist and activist Kudzanai Chiurai, plays on a loop. A reimagined Last Supper of black disciples dressed as African stereotypes, it brings attention to the distance between Western perceptions of the African continent and the realities of contemporary Africa.

The hypnotic soundtrack of *Iyeza* adds an extra layer to the museum experience as it accompanies viewers through the rest of the East Gallery, seamlessly bringing them into *Transitions*. An entire wall is devoted to the ivories, which include ornate elephant tusks, human figures, and a delicate crochet hook. Three photographs from Constance Thalken’s recent series *Eyes Open Slowly* (2016) are exhibited on the opposite wall, inviting the viewer into conversation on the nature of animals and humans, life and death, and the space in between. The beautiful and haunting photographs, taken over the past two years at a taxidermy studio, seem to suggest that the viewer reconsider what is lost in the process of suspension and exhibition of the natural world. In *Eyes Open Slowly #2*, a pair of forgotten talons hangs from a metal wire, echoing the violence immortalized in the ivory tusks.

Also in the East Gallery, Willie Cole’s *Sole Flower* (2015) blooms from the wall as though striving to engulf the viewer. The petals on Cole’s *Sole Flower* are made from the bottoms of shoes, noticeably worn and frayed, indicating a passage of time, through hardship. The exhibition catalogue compares the piece to the grand rosette windows of Gothic cathedrals and to the lotus petals of a mandala, creating a spiritual context for the works, and asserting that viewers have entered a sacred space.

Installed in a room on its own, Joe Peragine’s contribution consists of two separate installations taken from the same body of work, *Love Me Till My Heart Stops* and *Dime Museum* (both 2016). Like Thalken, Peragine is deeply interested in taxidermy, and his work explores the unsavory implications of such preservation; his eclectic approach to the topic, however, contains a good deal more irony. This work may be familiar to anyone who saw his exhibition at the Marcia Wood Gallery in Atlanta earlier this year; in the context of *Transitions*, Peragine’s dark humor creates both a slightly inappropriate tension and a feeling of relief.

To experience the second part of *Transitions* viewers must pass through an atrium and enter the Mortin Galleries. There, the rhythmic musical backdrop of *Iyeza* is replaced with an audio recording of Iranian American Zohreh Birjandian reading a selection of

Bertolt Brecht’s play *Refugee Conversations* (1940), part of a cinematic project of the same name by Danielle Roney. The voiceover is part of a work, shot in Istanbul’s Sirkeci Terminal railway station, that aims to “illuminate the current and historical juxtapositions of human migration and conditions of exile caused by oppression and violence.” Viewers can sit in one of three black beanbag chairs, behind which looms a tangle of black metal fencing, and watch as Roney’s images fracture, blur, and overlap. Commuters, transportation infrastructure, and birds in flight appear and disappear as Birjandian narrates such observations as, “The noblest part of man is his passport,” and “We set what we want to observe on fire by trying to observe it.”

In the East Gallery, the flow of works between *Sleight of Hand*, the ivory collection, and the contemporary art felt smooth; in the Mortin Galleries *Transitions* seems more disjointed. Greeting viewers at the entrance to this second space is Alexis Rockman’s *Untitled (Bananas)* (2013), a large watercolor and gouache piece that tackles the disturbing past of agricultural colonialism. Installed in contrast near Rockman’s bold reds and greens are Amy Pleasant’s subtle sculptures and drawings of fragmented faces and figures. Whereas much of the other work in *Transitions* addresses the themes of colonialism, shifting historical perspective, and liminal space fairly directly, Pleasant’s work was not placed within such explicit context, making viewers come to their own conclusions about its inclusion—or, accidentally pass by it, to land in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s eye-catching wallpapered gallery.

Hershman Leeson has worked with many media-based technologies to explore contemporary issues such as biological computing, AI, the relationship between human and machine, and as seen in *Transitions*, the ethics surrounding genetic modification. Installed in a small, bright room within the Mortin Galleries is her visual index *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Engine)* (2014) documenting different GMOS and the motivations for their creation, from the Flavr Savr Tomato to the unsettling (but also cute?) Jellyfish Feline—genetic manipulations that are placed in comparison to the manipulations of culture and tradition imposed by colonialism.

*Transitions: States of Being* is not an easy exhibition. It addresses complex questions of appropriation, exploitation, and the transitive properties of meaning across different contexts and cultures. It’s also information-heavy: wall texts, pamphlets, and an enlightening 50-page catalogue all serve to explain the purpose of the show and the artist selection. In any contemporary museum showing ivories, it is certainly crucial to explain the curatorial intention of using such a highly contested material. However, without reading the corresponding literature, much of the power of *Transitions* may be lost. Visitors willing to put in the effort will find a rich and insightful exhibition.

—Liz Flammig

ABOVE: Kudzanai Chiurai, *Iyeza*, 2012, still from video [courtesy of the artist]