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# Black Lives Shine in Rico Gatson's New Show

by [SIDDHARTHA MITTER](#)

JULY 11, 2017



**Rico Gatson Nina, 2007 colored pencil, marker, photocollage on paper 22 1/4 x 30 inches**  
COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: LANTERNIER

Rico Gatson's studio, in Bushwick, is awash in color and geometry. Tall rectangular panels painted in intricate patterns lean against a wall like abstract totems. Other planks lie across tables, works in progress involving ovals and circles. Large paintings on the wall alternate geometric sections in red, black, orange, yellow, and green with others in black and white. Nearby, silhouettes taken from vintage images of Black Panthers and civil rights protesters stand beneath strong colored vertical stripes or radiating lines.

Black history is in the room — in the African textile references of some of the painted panels, with colors and patterns reminiscent of kente cloth; in archival photographs of spectators at lynchings that Gatson is building into new work; on the bookshelf, with its tomes on African masks, Emmett Till, and New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians. But so is the pull of abstraction, the concern with lines, blocks, repetition, variance.

"History is important, and so is abstraction," Gatson tells me. "Nothing is ever literal in the work. There are specific things that I'm trying to address, but in a way that isn't about telling or retelling the history. My program is to move it in some other direction."

"Icons," Gatson's current exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, embodies this approach. It features collage-based drawings from a series that celebrates Black cultural heroes in an idiosyncratic, abstracted style, in which bold, precise lines radiate from small cut-out photographs. The mix of influences — minimalism, constructivism, propaganda art — and the earnest but oblique engagement with history are characteristic of the 51-year-old artist. But these works on paper, begun in 2007, are just one stream in his oeuvre, which spans sculpture, painting, and video, sometimes in combination.

Born in Georgia but raised in Riverside, California, Gatson grew up in the kind of modest, tract-homes setting where people like his parents — a nurse and a steelworker-turned-landscaping contractor who left the South at the tail end of the Great Migration — were forming a new Black middle class. His political awakening, however, happened as an undergraduate at Bethel College in Minnesota in the late Eighties. There, he says, the confluence of living in an overwhelmingly white milieu, hearing the militant music of Public Enemy and others, and being encouraged by a professor who guided him toward writers like bell hooks and Frantz Fanon sparked a lifelong interest in race and identity.

Gatson switched his major from graphic design to fine art and went on to the Yale School of Art, where he studied sculpture under the program's longtime director,

minimalist sculptor David von Schlegell. He has pursued his career since the Nineties in New York City, including the past thirteen years in Bushwick, making him an elder of the neighborhood scene.

In early video works, Gatson remixed scenes from Black history in woozy, kaleidoscopic sequences; two of these montages appeared in “Freestyle,” an influential 2001 exhibition at the Studio Museum that brought notice to a host of Black artists. For a solo show in 2006 — at his longtime gallery, Ronald Feldman, and the Cheekwood Museum in Nashville — he devised panels, sculptures, and videos that rendered racist symbols (Nazi eagle, Confederate flag) and artifacts of trauma (the whipping post, the auction block) in hypnotic linear patterns. The show took its title, “African Fractals,” from Ron Eglash’s study of geometric occurrence in African architecture and design, a book Gatson consults to this day.

“Icons” — oddly, this otherwise well-shown artist’s first New York museum solo — samples thirty pieces from an ongoing series of at least seventy, by Gatson’s estimate, which he says began somewhat by accident. “A friend down the hall who was making some drawings gave me some paper, and I happened to have a set of colored pencils,” he says. His experiment became a method. Drawn from a familiar pantheon — Zora Neale Hurston to Michael Jackson by way of Muhammad Ali — each subject appears as a small figure appropriated from a vintage photograph, cut away from its context, and pasted onto a 22-by-30-inch sheet. Gatson then pencils in rays of color that beam from the subject across the expanse of the page. More than portraits, these are studies in energy.

“I was thinking early on about these figures as superheroes,” Gatson says. “As the series progressed, they became literally icons — the halos and lines are a graphic representation of energy coming out of them. The most important part for me is feeling.”

Gathered in the museum’s mezzanine gallery, the works produce a striking effect, an array of force fields. Nina Simone’s is black, brown, orange, red; it rises from her Afro — the classic source photo, in which she crouches, looking fierce, is from a 1969 shoot by Jack Robinson — to the firmament. A black-and-white beam flows from Charlie Parker’s saxophone, and another, symmetrically, back across his body. Ali, arms aloft, darts narrow rays of color from his fists. Some figures appear in double, as if negotiating a dual identity across the page. Stokely Carmichael’s rays intersect, forming a vortex; Amiri Baraka’s meet but do not cross, as if an invisible wall bisected the page.

With its heroes and halos, the visual language evokes designs by Emory Douglas, the minister of culture in the Black Panther Party and the main illustrator of its newspaper. Gatson cites Douglas as a major influence; his own icons, however, turn the emphasis away from overt politics. In laying out the works and meticulously filling the beams in colored pencil, he engages his subjects on a meditative level. “It’s a satisfying process, like anything that’s slow and repetitive,” he says. “The transfer of energy is important insofar as paying homage to these figures. They’re not limited to activism; you get to a layer beyond the surface.”

Gatson’s experiments have forebears he’s quick to acknowledge: Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings, Carmen Herrera’s vivid shapes, Agnes Martin’s contemplative canvases. His painted planks are brash descendants of the stark polished slabs the minimalist artist John McCracken pioneered two generations ago. He mentions, too, a more mystical ancestry in early Swedish abstract artist Hilma af Klint and Swiss artist Emma Kunz, for the way their esoteric drawings “touched upon spirituality, philosophy, and restorative practices.”

Gatson also credits Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam, elder Black abstractionists who, like other Black artists in that world, were long overlooked. Still, he demurs when it comes to claiming their legacy. “I never considered myself in the conversation of Black abstract art,” he says. “I suppose that’s because I have so much reverence for the practitioners and their long journey to recognition. Plus my work is constantly switching between abstraction and representation.”

A parallel Gatson more gladly embraces is with jazz, which relies on geometries of rhythm yet progresses through their disruption via improvisation. “I think about visual time, visible time,” he says. “Music is very important to me. There’s a lot happening in this studio, a lot of shapes; it’s very busy. But playing with that — back to the notion of jazz — I’m thinking about improvisation, about how the eye moves and the potential for some sort of impact on the viewer.” Fully one-third of the subjects in the “Icons” show are jazz artists, among them John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Thelonious Monk, and a resplendent Sun Ra who beams red and black rays, this image built around the Egyptian pharaoh-meets-extraterrestrial cover art from the album *Space Is the Place*.

Gatson’s “Icons” are currently his most visible work; when his gallery devoted its booth at this year’s Armory Show to him, it was heavy on pieces in the series. The Studio Museum show amplifies this effect, but Hallie Ringle, the assistant curator who organized it, says she hopes it will prompt interest in a major retrospective. In the meantime, Gatson is preparing an outdoor installation of “totemic structures,” based

on his leaning panels, at the Katonah Museum of Art in Westchester County next spring.

The icons carry on, he says. He only just got around to Malcolm X; a Sarah Vaughan piece is also new. “I never intended to do it for ten years,” Gatson notes, “but I remain inspired, which is the good news.” And the work still brings him fresh insight. Recently, someone asked if the lines beamed out from the characters, or rather in toward them — an alternative way of looking that he says he had not considered. “Sometimes these things have to be pointed out, even to the maker,” Gatson says. “That’s the best part for me: I don’t have control.”



# HOW RADICAL CAN A PORTRAIT BE?

By Vinson Cunningham

Cunningham, Vinson. "How Radical Can a Portrait Be?" *The New Yorker*. May 5 2017.

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-importance-of-the-faces-on-the-walls>



Rico Gatson's "Nina," from 2007, is on display at the Studio Museum in Harlem as part of "Icons," a solo exhibition of the artist's recent works on paper.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANTERNIER, 2007 / COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

In March, I went to see the first Biennial to be held at the Whitney's new building downtown, near the Hudson and the High Line, with an artist friend whom I knew to be the best kind of museum companion—entirely comfortable with splitting up until the end of the visit. We took the elevator together between floors but were otherwise invisible to one another until, after an hour or so, we left the exhibition and started to walk. As we went, my friend expressed his disappointment with the show. It wasn't that the work was

uniquely bad or ill chosen. “It’s just—I sort of couldn’t believe how many *paintings* there were,” he said. “And, like, *photographs*.” He wasn’t wrong. As Peter Schjeldahl mentions in his recent review, some of the most striking pieces in the show were pictures, more or less straightforward, representational ones: Henry Taylor’s vivid, emotional painting of Philando Castile and the firearm, crudely drawn, that ended his life; Deana Lawson’s gauzy photograph of three shirtless young black men, distinctly reminiscent of album art; a series of goofy, darkly funny paintings by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. The show had been hailed as political, but how radical could it be, he asked, if it leaned so heavily on these old, conservative forms, however bold the messages they’d been used to convey?

I didn’t say much as he talked; I was sort of embarrassed, and not for him. For me, the pleasure of seeing a familiar world of faces and flora transfigured in a print or on a canvas is more than enough reason to take the subway to a building where art hangs on white walls. I rarely stop to consider that the meaning of a work is to some degree—and maybe, in the end, entirely—captive to the contingencies of history. How can Renaissance-descended portraiture, developed in order to magnify dynastic princes and the keepers of great fortunes, adequately convey twenty-first-century realities or work as an agent of political liberation? Even a retinue of multicolored faces staring out from the gallery walls amounts to little more, according to this argument, than new wine in old skins. It’s the same thing we see elsewhere in American life: every prestigious university and respectable corporation has a glossy catalogue or slick commercial that looks like Noah’s Ark—two, at least, of each kind. But wouldn’t real progress require drastically altered corporate structures or a reimagined approach to tuition? Have the subversions of, say, Kehinde Wiley—however biting comic—meaningfully altered the American image culture that often pushes the dispossessed off to the side? Not *really*. Wiley’s work has slipped smoothly into soap operas and advertisements for luxury goods—proof, perhaps, of the fecklessness of its pluralistic gestures. As I listened to my friend, I wondered: Should this matter to someone like me, who finds all but automatic pleasure in the illustrated workings of a human face?

Confusion of this sort, over the efficacy of figuration, seems, to me, to have been the unacknowledged cause behind the fracas over the Biennial’s most controversial work: a painting of Emmett Till’s mangled corpse, by the artist Dana Schutz. The uproar over the work’s inclusion in the show—which included an in-museum protest and a misguided call for the painting’s destruction—smacked of old-fashioned Protestantism: the famous photograph of Till in his coffin has, understandably, taken on the significance of a religious icon, and the furor over its sublimation into art felt like an enforcement, duly secularized, of the Old Testament commandment against the making of graven images. (Also at work was the newer notion of particularist cultural ownership, under whose strictures Till’s likeness should be off limits to a white artist like Schutz.) One wonders how Schutz’s meditation on Till’s murder would have been received if her painting had been totally abstract—like, for instance, Sam Gilliam’s stormy “April 4,” a blood-splattered tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., that now hangs at the newly

established National Museum of African American History and Culture. Or symbolized in the manner of David Driskell's homage to Till, also housed at the N.M.A.A.H.C., which refigures the boy as a crucified Christ. Schutz's riotous, cartoonish paintings often test the boundary between figuration and abstraction—her faux portrait "Face Eater" is a particularly funny example—but, in "Open Casket," this negotiation between modes betrays an ambivalence about whether this image is hers to portray at all. (Schutz admits her hesitation in a recent Profile by Calvin Tomkins.) Till's funeral suit is rendered clearly enough, but his face, the site of deepest trauma, explodes into thick, swirling, ultimately evasive strokes, even as the canvas leaves the wall and juts forward toward the viewer. Elsewhere, this half-blurriness is a strength of Schutz's work, but here it is a symptom of constriction, verging on outright fear—and not only hers.

Into this twitchy atmosphere come, helpfully, two new exhibitions, both at the Studio Museum in Harlem. One, "Regarding the Figure," curated by Eric Booker, Connie H. Choi, Hallie Ringle, and Doris Zhao, and drawn largely from the museum's permanent collection, is a reflection—mercifully free of neurosis or worry—on what faces and bodies have meant to art's recent and distant past. Here, figures are art itself, no mere phase or moment in time. Henry Ossawa Tanner's lithograph "The Three Marys" presents the women at Christ's tomb as a study in developing sorrow: three faces, three stages of grief. The Mary closest to us—she must be the Virgin—is just in the middle of raising her hands. There's mourning again in Henry Taylor's muted "Homage to a Brother," where behind the half-silhouetted torso of a departed boy, his name—Sean—stands in monumental capital letters. The forms, alphabetical and bodily, approximate a street mural, or a shrine. Other pieces are more joyful. "Afro Goddess with Hands Between Legs," a photograph by Mickalene Thomas, is what it says it is: a woman with a gorgeous puff of hair lays sideways on a couch, the foamy patterns of her clothes playing nicely against a checkered throw, her right hand disappearing suggestively into her skirt. Her eyeshadow is cool, penetrating, blue. In another photo, a self-portrait by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, the artist—slim, serious—stands without affect in what looks like a studio, naked, save for a pair of socks, from the waist down. In his hands he holds his pants.

Doubles are a quiet mini-theme of the show. "Sisters III (L: Nefertiti's Daughter, Maketaten; R: Devonia's Daughter, Kimberley)," a work from Lorraine O'Grady's "Miscegenated Family Album" series, sets the Afro-framed face of a young girl against an Egyptian bust in stone. There's an eerie resemblance between the two—their upper lips peak at the same point—and the photograph feels like a comment on the twin facts of mortality and birth, how they make the basic facial template inexhaustible. Lyle Ashton Harris keeps his doubles in the present: a photo of his face, then the cornrowed back of his head. Now you know him, now you don't. In Zanele Muholi's "Bona, Charlottesville," a woman faces away from us and into a big, round mirror. Her smoothly muscled arm bulges with the slight strain of holding it aloft. Her hair is intricately done; her eyes, reflected, appraise.



The centerpiece of “Regarding the Figure” is Barkley Hendricks’s masterwork “Lawdy Mama,” from 1969. The painting seems more poignant, and somehow more urgent, because of Hendricks’s recent death. A sandy-skinned woman with a huge halo of hair (as you might have picked up, Afros abound) stands against a window-shaped gold-leaf background. The arrangement is meant, obviously, to evoke the atmosphere of sainthood, but the woman’s carriage is unmistakably modern: with her left hand she tenderly holds her opposite elbow. She stares directly at the viewer, with the kind of classical intensity that made me vaguely afraid of portraits as a child. Her mouth is pursed, minutely—maybe consternation, maybe the beginnings of a slow, ironic smile. There are clear political valences in Hendricks’s wonderful, playfully exaggerated portraits of black people in uncountable poses of confidence, cool, defiance, and, more often than advertised, repose. But, reading the writer Antwaun Sargent’s lovely tribute, I found myself excited to learn that Hendricks preferred to steer his discussion of the work away from politics and toward technique. The world’s complications were obvious enough. Painting, however infected by the news, was its own reward, and people justified their presence on his canvases not as instruments or agitprop but as agents of unlikely continuity with the past.

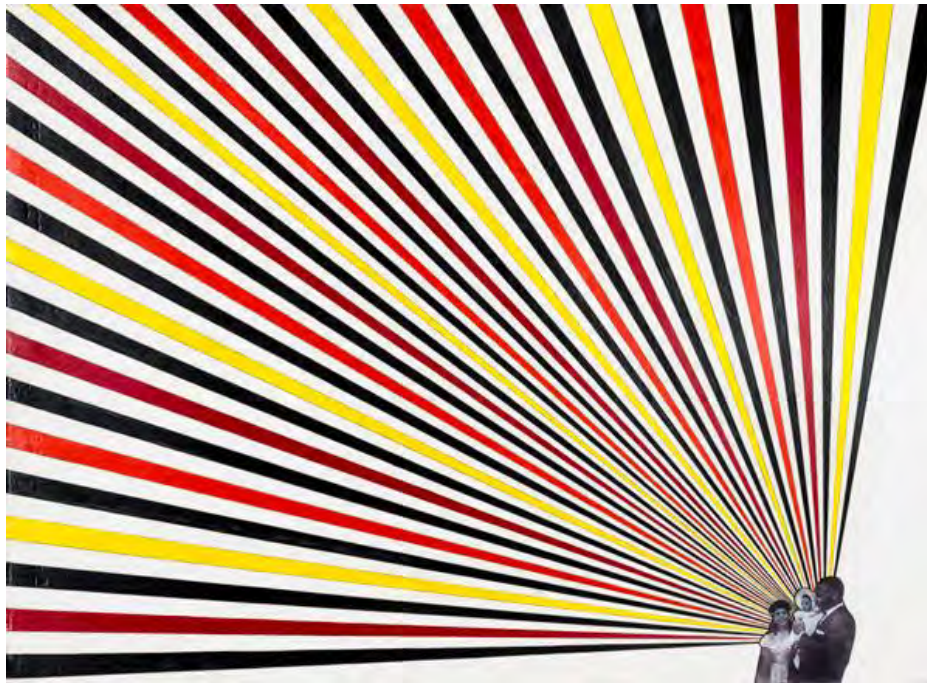
“Icons,” a solo exhibition of recent works on paper by the artist Rico Gatson, curated by Hallie Ringle, takes this ecstasy in personhood and makes it as visible as people themselves. Gatson appropriates old photographic images of famous black Americans—Zora Neale Hurston, Gil Scott-Heron, Nina Simone, Marvin Gaye—and surrounds them with bright, colorful lines that shoot outward from the personages to the borders of the page. Each of his titles is a simple, familiar first name. Purple, black, yellow, and red sprout from Zora’s scarved head. Bird’s horn shouts out black and white. Sam—Cooke, that is—has lines shooting out of his shoulders and his toes. The lines are reminiscent of Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings; these works feel like a slight rebuke of Minimalism’s turn away from the human form. Stripped of the cityscapes and histories into which they were born—and which, by their exertions, they helped, in varying degrees, to change—Gatson’s “icons” held my anxieties at bay, if only for a while. Politics pass away, they seem to say. People never do, in art at least.

# RICO GATSON: *Icons* 2007-2017

by William Corwin

THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM | APRIL 20 – AUGUST 27, 2017

When elevating a human subject to sainthood or, at least making them an object of veneration, an artist needs to consider practically how it is that light or beams of pure **energy will emanate from their being**. Rico Gatson's exhibition *Icons 2007–2017* is just such an exercise in catapulting the human into the supernatural realm. We are watching an artist doing what artists do best: rendering the unimaginable into the visual and the unspeakable into human terms. Selecting a group of historically and culturally influential African Americans—Muhammad Ali, Lena Horne, Thelonious Monk, and Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King among many others—Gatson painstakingly draws multi-colored beams of light or striated energy fields around collaged photographs. While his inspiration seems to come from the Bauhaus lessons of Josef Albers and Johannes Itten, crossed with a color palette redolent of pan-Africanism, his approach to these drawings exhibit the sentiment of a true believer like Andrei Rublev, the great 14th-century Russian icon painter. Gatson tackles the confounding problem of creating a halo for the 21st century, how a monk might stress **over whether the gilt background in an icon will butt up against the subject's chin or skip a patch and resume at the shoulder**; these things may seem silly, but they end up defining our vision of the sacred and supernatural.



Rico Gatson, *Martin with Family*, 2016. Colored pencil, marker, photocollage on paper, 22 x 30 1/4 in. Private collection; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Gatson's drawings utilize some of the visual tropes of Constructivism, the Bauhaus and overt revolutionaries like Emory Douglas, the **Black Panthers's Minister of Culture**.

Thus, they have an aura of the political poster as well as the devotional image, but they are far more than mere propaganda for a worthy cause. Several of the images, such as *Double Stokely* (2016) and *Double Miles* (2009), are doubled and mirrored so they engage in a dialogue with themselves. While the beams of light, power or sound that emanate from the small figures generally situated at the bottom corners of the page recall the loud, vivacious graphics of Rodchenko, the doubling adds a level of futility to **the figures' actions. These are voices crying in the wilderness as much as power figures**, prophets whose words were not heeded or heard too late. Other images are more playful. In *Cassius* (2007), the Greatest rises on his own rays of black, brown, and orange, like the self-propelling Iron Man or Silver Surfer, with his look of undefeatable self-confidence.

Unlike the thick opaque pigments of illuminated manuscripts, icons, or even Gatson's own hard-edged sculpture, the *Icons* are drafted in colored pencil and, on closer investigation, have a fuzzy and colored-in quality that reveals the hand and method of the artist. They seem like something of a private and personal crusade; a visual hagiography in which the artist's **voice is his line, through which he consistently** describes his method of adoring each figure. Created over the past ten years, they

appear to be an artistic oasis beyond Gatson's rigorous sculpture practice, a confluence between the artist and his spiritual mentors. These drawings represent a beautiful, repeated, meticulous chore, like counting the rosary or prayer beads, or chanting a mantra: a means of quietly reaching out and thanking those who are tacitly responsible for one's creative output.

The black-and-white cut-out photos are heavily contrasted and grainy, but they take up relatively little real estate on the sheet of paper, while the outsize beams they produce cannot fail to convey the immense stature—cultural, symbolic, and political—that these individuals hold. It is fun to discern the individual nuances and differences within this catalog of haloes. *RA* (2014) simply expands unstoppably upward. Some of the two and three colored rainbow patterns seem to weigh heavily on the subjects such as *Nina* (2007) or *Trane #2* (2014), while others, as in *Martin w/ Family* (2016), seem to expand the aura of the family rather than fence them in. *Sam* [Sam Cooke] (2010) chases down the aesthetic possibilities of these mystical beams as the various colors burst out of his chair, head, toes, and thighs; indicating a boundless energy that can't be controlled. The most sentimental of all the images is the portrait of Basquiat, *Samo #1* (2011), who radiates this colored-pencil plasma from the crown of his head and forehead—but more poignantly—a beam bursts from his heart.



# Students Collaborate with Renowned Artist Rico Gatson to Create the Mead's First Hall Walls Mural

Rogol, Rachel. "Students Collaborate with Renowned Artist Rico Gatson to Create the Mead's First Hall Walls Mural." *Amherst College*, February 21, 2017.

[https://www.amherst.edu/news/news\\_releases/2017/2-2017/students-collaborate-with-renowned-artist-rico-gatson](https://www.amherst.edu/news/news_releases/2017/2-2017/students-collaborate-with-renowned-artist-rico-gatson)

A new annual project gives artists and students the freedom to create an ephemeral work of art on the walls of the Mead Art Museum.

**FEBRUARY 21, 2017** by Rachel Rogol; photos by Maria Stenzel



Rico Gatson with Amherst students Tacia Diaz '19 and Chelsea Pan '18

Just beyond the main gallery of Amherst's celebrated Mead Art Museum is a new work unlike any the museum has displayed before. Created by renowned artist Rico Gatson in collaboration with Amherst students, the work covers five walls of a previously unassuming hallway inside the museum.



“The combination of color and converging lines adds movement to the hallway,” says Chloe Tausk ’19E, “transforming the space and creating a new atmosphere for guests to experience.”



Rico Gatson with Chloe Tausk '19E

Tausk, a studio art and English major from Chicago, is one of five students who created the mural with Gatson. “I did not know much about Rico’s work before the mural, but I love seeing and hearing about it now,” Tausk says. “I especially love that the Mead has a work of his on display right before the hallway.”

That work, titled *St. James #3*, is from a series of collage drawings by Gatson that served as the inspiration for the mural’s design. The series features iconic African-American personalities—among them Nina Simone, Muhammad Ali and James Baldwin—with colorful lines drawn from the center of each figure to the edge of the work.

“For years, I wanted to translate the power of the lines onto actual walls, creating an immersive experience or installation,” Gatson says. “The *Hall Walls* project has provided the perfect opportunity.”





**Artist Rico Gatson**

Working from a master plan, Gatson encouraged the students to brainstorm various approaches they might use when measuring, sketching and painting the mural.

**“Working with Rico was incredibly rewarding,”** says Emma Hartman ’17, an art history and chemistry major from upstate New York, **“because he was so willing to involve us in the artistic decision-making process.”**

For students interested in careers in the arts, the mural project provides insight into one of the many ways art might be central to their lives after Amherst. **“Working with Rico has given me a glimpse of what projects a professional artist might focus on,”** says Jay Fields ’17, who comes from the San Francisco Bay Area and is triple-majoring in black studies; sexuality, women’s and gender studies; and studio art.

For Fields, the mural project also relates to her academic and personal life at Amherst. **“Mural painting has obvious links to my studio art major,”** Fields says, **“but my initial interest in the project mostly stemmed from wanting to see more murals throughout the Amherst campus.”**

The mural remains on view through December 2017.

## Rico Gatson

NEW YORK,  
at Studio 10

by Sarah Schmerler

Rico Gatson: *Panel*  
*Painting #1*, 2014,  
paint and glitter on  
wood panel, 96 inches  
high; at Studio 10.



For almost two decades, Rico Gatson has been making strong work that stands at the intersection of formalist abstraction and social commentary. This solo exhibition was a stand-alone project at Studio 10 in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood. (He is normally affiliated with Ronald Feldman Fine Art in Manhattan.) Gatson took on some of the thornier issues of racial identity with which he continuously wrestles, using the gallery almost like a lab for working them out. Must oppression be a crucible for identity? Does where you stand on a difficult issue necessarily define who you are? Gatson hands out no easy answers (who could?), but, in seeking them, he's willing to put himself and his own position as a black artist on the line.

On view was a group of works (most from 2014) in diverse mediums: painting, sculpture, a photo collage and a looping video projected onto a handmade wooden screen. In concert, they formed a unified mise-en-scène with a DIY vibe. The centerpiece was *When She Speaks*, a 5½-minute video featuring archival black-and-white footage of Kathleen Cleaver—who, with her husband Eldridge, was a member of the Black Panthers—delivering a speech at the funeral of 18-year-old Bobby Hutton, killed by police during the raid of a house in West Oakland, Calif., in which two officers were

wounded. Tensions were high, and her words, which reinterpreted Ecclesiastes ("a time to be born, a time to die; a time to love, a time to hate; a time to fight, and a time to retreat. In the name of brotherhood and survival, remember Bobby"), feel more like a call to arms than an offer of comfort.

As we watch, her image becomes kaleidoscopically fragmented and moves around the screen. Superimposed, and languidly merging in and out of Rorschach-like doublings, are geometric shapes in orange, red, green and yellow, a palette associated with African nationalism that Gatson often uses. The only other sound besides Cleaver's voice is a brief, sharp, even tapping. Overall, the effect is a mix of the hypnotic and the unsettling. Cleaver is telling us something that is ideologically emphatic, but in this fragmented context, her ideas don't quite line up.

Elsewhere, Gatson used visual rhythms and abstract motifs more seamlessly, knitting together unresolved racial issues with an uncannily calm formal logic. On one wall was a painting featuring a photomontaged black-and-white image of a female mask of the Dan tribe (perhaps an ancestral, pre-Diaspora analogue for Cleaver). Superimposed over the masks, arranged in two horizontal rows, are sharply colored vertical stripes—a visual pun on prison bars?—that felt like a visual echo of the video's tapping sound. Behind the video, a narrow totemic painting, this one solely an abstract pattern of colored and black stripes, leaned lazily against the wall. When Gatson renders black lines, he often adds a texture to them (created from glued and over-painted glitter) that resembles close-cropped "nappy" hair. Afro hair, set in rows—as if to say, when a culture is made to fall in line, it is the more easily subdued.

Gatson titled the show with a dependent clause—"When She Speaks"—seeming to underscore that when it comes to race, we are, as a country, only in medias res. A hundred and fifty years after the Civil War and half a century after the Civil Rights movement, our identity issues are just as hard to "speak," but, as Gatson argues, an honest tension is better than complacency.



Friday, April 19, 2013

## Artist Interview: Rico Gatson

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In his latest solo show, *The Promise of Light*, artist Rico Gatson pays visual tribute to a decades-long history of Black migration from the south to California, partly interpreted through his own family's journey. Gatson's show is currently on view at the Ronald Feldman gallery in New York through May 18, 2013.

**D&B: As a multidisciplinary artist, how do you determine what medium to use for your message?**

RG: I tend to work in all media at once because that is what makes the most sense to me. It is about having experiences in multiple materials in order to provide a form for the ideas.



The Promise of Light, 2013  
(detail)  
1 channel video projection run time: 6 minutes

**Was "The Promise of Light" show the first time you worked with photography?**

This was not the first time I used digital imagery in work. It's been part of my process for over 12 years. I've worked with both digital photography and video as another way of expressing ideas.

**How do photographic images inspire your paintings?**

The photographic imagery functions as a source of inspiration to develop an image and is a jumping off point for much of the work, including collage, digital images, in addition to the painting.



Family #3, 2013  
unique inkjet print on paper  
21 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches

**Can you talk about the meaning behind the rainbow-colored, light flare effect on the three "Family" photographs in your show?**

The prismatic light is beautiful and functions as a veil, transforming the black-and-white source image, rendering it anew.

**Was this the first time you incorporated your family into your work? Did you have any reservations?**

I've incorporated aspects of family in my work for many years in different ways, but this is the first time I've used actual family photographs as a source material.



Magic Stick #15, 2013  
paint on wood  
90 3/8 x 49 7/8 x 15 inches

**Why did you decide to do a piece about Obama? How does he figure into the underlying narrative of Black migration within the USA?**

I've done several pieces on Obama in recent years. He represents both an ideal and the culmination of a journey. I'm interested in examining this notion in the work.

**Recently I had a professor tell me that the role of an artist is not to fill in the gaps of history. Do you agree? How do you think your work operates within past and future histories?**

Yes, I agree that the role of an artist is not to fill in the gaps. I use historical information as a source for generating work, but, ultimately, how the work operates within history is not determined by me. The methods and concepts I employ in my work place me within a certain context, determined by time.





## Geometry is real

Rico Gatson, "Mystery Object," 2011, paint, wood, glitter and plexi-glass.



Last week I stopped by Exit Art to see "Geometric Days," an exhilarating exhibition of new paintings that "deploy geometry to expose organizational structures from microscopic, political, and spiritual dimensions." I agree with the premise that geometry, abstraction and painting are ingrained in our interpretation of experience. Yes, geometry is a measure of space and time, abstraction is a poetic expression of the visual, and painting is the manifestation of a will to communicate. Indeed, geometry isn't always abstract—it's simply another form of reality.

These paintings call upon mathematics as a spiritual force (and geometry as its visual realization) that codes the experiences of nature, built environments, social constructs,

and the digital world. "For these artists geometry is more than a combination of lines," curator Artist/Curator Papo Colo writes. "The nature of images is mathematical. Geometry divides borders, topography and climate. This labyrinth of numbers and forms construct the world in a rational way but also transform surfaces/images into spiritual substances that take you to a space of esoteric solutions." Paintings by Rico Gatson, Peter Hildebrand, Charles Koegel, Geoffrey Owen Miller, Driss Ouadahi, Paul Pagk, Nathalie Provosty, and Dannielle Tegeder are included in the show. For me, Rico Gatson's irresistible constructed pieces and Paul Pagk's big awkward geometries stole the show.

"Geometric Days," curated by Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo with Herb Tam. Exit Art, New York, NY. Through April 30, 2011.



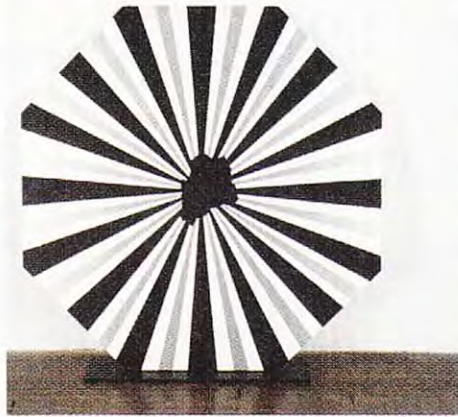
Rico Gatson, "Mask," 2010, paint wood and glitter.



Rico Gatson, "Sojourner Truth," 2011, oil on canvas.



## Rico Gatson, "Dark Matter"



★★★★★

**Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,**  
through Mar 14 (see Soho)

Rico Gatson treats the notion of identity the way Ed Ruscha treats text in his "liquid word" series: Gatson stretches and skews the issue until meaning strains at the end of its logical tether. For his current show, Gatson combines source materials and reference points from America's racial history in a kaleidoscopic array ranging from almost abstract to overtly political.

A three-channel video, *Spirit, Myth, Ritual and Liberation*, employs mirroring techniques to splice, loop and create moving Rorschachs of such horrific filmic moments as the one in the Rolling Stones' documentary *Gimme Shelter*, in which Meredith Hunter, a young African-American, is killed by

Hells Angels. Spotlit in the darkness of evening, Hunter can be seen in a green leisure suit as he's tossed in the tides of an increasingly agitated crowd.

Sculptures in the second part of the exhibit combine a Minimalist aesthetic with veiled allusions to black militancy. In *Nigeria Power*, a painted wood panel marked by radiating lines, the title connects the dots between the form of the work and symbols of resistance. Other freestanding sculptures recall African art in a manner that undoubtedly references its influence on Western art.

Were these works presented individually, one might miss their nuance. But taken as a whole and in context with the films, the pieces reflect on the inextricably linked histories of white and black in America.—T.J. Carlin



# Cheekwood

temporary contemporary



## **Rico Gatson: African Fractals**

June 2-July 30, 2006



## artist statement

My work is rooted in identity politics, spirituality, history and personal experience. It is an attempt to understand these topics as they relate to myself and to the collective.

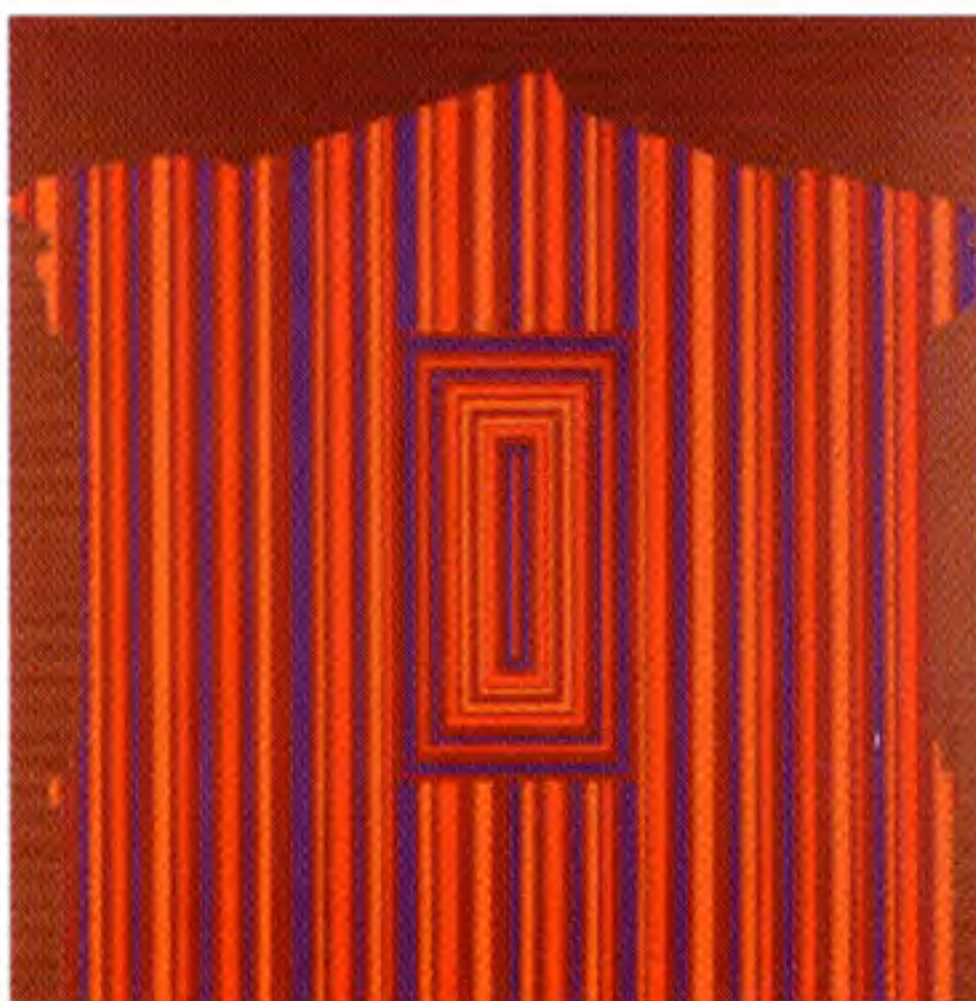
I am not interested in working in a specific material or style. Rather, I utilize various media and cross disciplines. Furthermore, I combine and juxtapose subjects that feel disparate. For example, I have combined hate symbols with indigenous patterning and modernist structure. The tension created by these combinations and juxtapositions is interesting to me.

Finally, I want to create work that is layered and complex but is open at same time. It is important for me to lead the viewer while not telling them how to think.

— *Rico Gatson*



*Iraqi Landscape,*  
2006, latex paint on  
plywood, 48" x 48"



*Lower Ninth  
Mausoleum, 2006,*  
latex paint on ply-  
wood, 48" x 48"



*Nape of the Neck,  
Small of the Back,*  
2006, latex paint on  
plywood, 48" x 48"

**R i c o   G a t s o n :   A f r i c a n   F r a c t a l s**



In this body of work Rico Gatson bridges two continents, casting a critical eye at American social history and politics and looking to Africa for design motifs. This intriguing combination is mirrored in the exhibition's title: *African Fractals*, which was inspired by a book identifying fractal geometry as a foundational design element in African culture. Its author, Ron Elgash, a scholar of systems theory, explored the endlessly repeating geometric patterns that occur in settlement architecture in Central and West Africa, as well as in designs for carving, hairstyling, metalwork, textiles, games, and religious ceremonies. Gatson applies these patterns to the numbing midst of American life. The red, purple, and gold, and the repetition and variation of geometric elements come from African strip-weaving, beadwork, or village compound architecture. Some are combined with neutral background elements such as earth-toned stripes, pre-scored sheets of wood paneling, or solid white backgrounds. The dynamism of the African design elements seems frozen inside a fixed frame, perhaps suggesting the paralyzing stasis of dual identity.

By creating a personal form of abstraction, Gatson enters the modernist dialogue. Visual language, at first familiar, is seen as referring to African technology. Gatson's crisp and elegant latex panel paintings are fraught with the overtones of contemporary and historical events. The three-dimensional constructions, of simple materials such as plywood and lightbulbs, become deceptively complex. In *Recursive Form in Indigenous Design* (2006) for example, three circles of lights are set inside one another in a diminishing ratio of 2:1 with a factor of 8. The video piece *Ali Bumbaye (Double Cross)* (2006) re-arranges footage of a carnival celebrating the 1974 Ali-Foreman fight staged in Zaire, Africa. The result is a kaleidoscopic frenzy.

Gatson's subject matter ranges from the historical to the contemporary, from burning crosses and Black Panther Party activist Kathleen Cleaver, to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq. While the silhouette of Cleaver's 1970s Afro hairstyle and the shape of the above-ground burial vaults commonly used in low-lying areas might be recognizable, other connections are more subtle. Gatson's poetically titled *Nape of the Neck, Small of the Back* (2006) pairs a seated male figure in silhouette with stylized markings located in the area of the lower torso. The use of complementary visual elements and disparate subjects is a conscious strategy designed to prod viewers into making intuitive and thoughtful connections of their own.

Although he grew up in southern California, Gatson's roots are in the Deep South slave-holding environs of Augusta, Georgia, once a thriving cotton market upriver from Savannah. Born after the major events of the modern Civil Rights Movement, Rico Gatson is one of a new wave of artists, once described as "post-black," who have moved beyond the militant self-aggrandizement of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s into the mainstream art world, inventing new genres of expression as they go.

— Susan W. Knowles, *Independent Curator*



## artist biography

*Born in Augusta, Georgia, Rico Gatson grew up in southern California. He is a graduate of Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Yale School of Art, from which he received his MFA in 1991. Currently living and working in Brooklyn, Gatson has participated in a number of important exhibitions including the Studio Museum in Harlem's groundbreaking "Freestyle" (2001), the Brooklyn Museum's "Open House: Working in Brooklyn" (2004), the Whitney Museum at Altria's "Fight or Flight" (2004), and P.S. 1's "Greater New York" (2005). Gatson's solo exhibition record includes: The Contemporary (Atlanta), Franklin Art Works (Minneapolis), Serge Ziegler Galerie (Zurich), and four shows at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (New York). He was the recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award for Visual Artists in 2001.*



***Recursive Form in  
Indigenous Design,  
2006, latex paint  
on plywood,  
paneling, lights,  
38" x 38" x 4-1/2"***

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*Cheekwood*

*Botanical Garden & Museum of Art*

Cheekwood Museum of Art's Temporary Contemporary was initiated in 1996 and consists of five solo exhibitions each year. Each show features innovative, influential and thought-provoking works by artists who are either from or currently living in the southeastern United States. Previous artists have included William Eggleston, Roe Ethridge, Kojo Griffin, Kerry James Marshall, and Robert Ryman.

*This exhibition is sponsored, in part, by a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.*

**Image on cover:**

***Southern Comfort, 2006,  
latex paint on plywood,  
48" x 71-5/8" x 1-3/4"***

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Courtesy Ronald Feldman  
Gallery, New York**



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## Rico Gatson

*Ronald Feldman Fine Arts*  
31 Mercer Street, SoHo  
Through May 29

A lot of young artists are mining the 1960's these days. Some focus on its trippy, rock-saturated visual culture. Others, like Rico Gatson, are into other things. His multipart video piece "History Lessons," projected on all four walls of the front gallery at Feldman, has the percussive pulse and flash of a light show. But the music it is keyed to is an early Bob Dylan protest song, "Only a Pawn in Their Game," written after the murder of Medgar Evers in pre-Flower Power 1963.

The song accompanies just one section of a 10-minute video composed of images of racial violence and racist stereotypes lifted from existing films, including W. D. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" (1915) and news clips of the Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965. Mr. Gatson has run all his material through a kind of digital blender, producing kaleidoscopic sequences that reveal their meaning only gradually. The perceptual delay is effective; it adds the suspense of discovery to a vision of history as a destructive form of popular entertainment.

If Mr. Gatson's approach is more than usually didactic, he also turns didacticism itself into a joke: the lyrics of the Dylan ballad are illustrated, phrase by phrase, with snappy images, like nursery rhymes on a children's television show. Given the shortness of historical memory

evident in American contemporary art, not to mention in the culture at large, this primer approach is altogether apt.

"Clandestine," the second part of the show, is made up primarily of all-white or all-black paintings, which look abstract from a distance but carry politically loaded images as reliefs made of lines of raised dots. One is a target; another an American flag; a third a skull and crossbones, the symbol for poison (and also for the secret society Skull and Bones, to which President Bush and Senator John Kerry belonged at Yale, where Mr. Gatson did graduate work).

He made effective use of this Minimalist-style painting as part of a video installation at Triple Candie last season. And there's no question that Minimalism's ideological dark side is ripe for serious probing. But the paintings at Feldman are too conceptually simplistic to make a forceful revisionist case.

In fact, "History Lessons" isn't revisionist either: basically, it gives us information we already know. But it is forceful; once you start looking, you have a hard time pulling back.

The same is true of Fred Wilson's extraordinary short film "September Song" (2003) at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Immediacy of involvement is one of the great formal advantages of film, and, as we're gradually learning, of digital art. Mr. Gatson, as historian and technician, is a master of both.

HOLLAND COTTER



Rico Gatson, *Gun Play*, 2001,  
 color video projection, 2 minutes 35 seconds.

# **RICO GATSON**

## RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

In the heyday of modernism, numerous theorists of art and architecture considered pattern and ornamentation to be synonymous with an archaic mind-set. For example, the architect Adolf Loos notoriously labeled ornament a crime against the purity of white walls, while the art historian Wilhelm Worringer argued that geometric abstraction helped "primitive" cultures live in denial of the corporeal world's frightening realities. Though not commenting directly on these early-twentieth-century biases, Rico Gatson's recent work seems geared to revive the debate. He turns well-known American films into crystalline tapestries of monstrously morphing images, rendering canonical scenes suddenly abstract and in the process temporarily alienating the viewer from the easy comforts of popular cinema.

Gatson's installation comprised five video projections (all 2001) shown on separate walls of the two-room space, paced so that only one would run at a time in each room. The works, each about the length of a music video, have rhythmic sound tracks composed of remixed snippets of music and voice-overs from the original movies. On the visual level, Gatson performs various digital manipulations, most often to kaleidoscopic effect: isolating a quarter of the film's frame, multiplying it by four, and rotating the images so they merge at the center of the screen. Fragments of identifiable scenes fill the frame for a moment, only to vanish into pure pattern in motion as the action changes.

The three works in the second room revolve around stereotypical representations of race. *Gun Play* borrows shoot-out scenes from *Foxy Brown* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, contrasting Pam Grier's African American heroine with Clint Eastwood's ruthless white gun-

slinger. So-called blaxploitation films are thematized in *Celebration*, which takes *The Mack* and *Superfly* as raw material for a rapidly moving collage of '70s urban drama. The most compelling piece was *Jungle Jungle*, an expertly edited mélange focusing on the scene in *King Kong* in which Fay Wray's character is offered as a sacrifice in the natives' ceremony. Intensifying his commentary on the film's racial subtext, Gatson used the colorized version of the 1933 original. The bright and ever-shifting patterns read as a send-up of the notion of the primal need for ornament. Wray's pale face, with its maudlin expressions of fear and suffering, alternately bobs to the surface and slips into the crevices of the dark Rorschach-like shapes of her surroundings.

In the first room, *Departure*, a rather ominous appropriation of Sigourney Weaver's battle with alternate life forms in Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien*, extends the theme of otherness. The video's driving score—sampled excerpts from the film's music combined with the spaceship's recorded countdown warning Weaver's character of imminent danger—adds to the furious pace of the rolling images, which include some well-chosen shots of Weaver looking like a cornered animal. The video's tight visual structure stands in contrast to *Arrival*, shown on the wall opposite *Departure*. Here Gatson simply replays at slow speed part of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which the Wicked Witch of the West first appears, turning the whole image upside-down at intervals. Though it's not an uninteresting treatment, it has the look of a more standard structuralist experiment and lacks the manic absurdity of the other videos.

In his best work, Gatson compels the viewer to negotiate a route through clashing visual systems: Abstraction momentarily overwhelms the known image, is quickly suppressed, and returns again. There is a kind of perverse pleasure in seeing our favorite cinematic moments dissected and reconfigured, their familiar surfaces momentarily unrecognizable, their Hollywood-style clichés briefly exposed.

—Gregory Williams

## Rico Gatson

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,  
through Dec 22  
(see Soho).

**R**ico Gatson, one of the brightest stars in the recent "Freestyle" exhibition of emerging black artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem, now presents a show of six videos that plays on the rampant attention-deficit disorder that is one result of the relentless Information Age. He edits and splices narrative snippet-length footage from pre-existing films—a famous ceremonial dance from the original *King Kong*, for example—to tease out new meanings. In the end, Gatson's pieces often look like meticulously animated tie-dyes or kaleidoscopically undulating patchwork quilts, through which barely visible yet surprisingly discernable images appear.

For this exhibition, Gatson focuses on representations of fear. His disconcerting *Departure*, for instance, is based on scenes from *Alien*. Projected six by eight feet, the video is an unrelenting, dizzying blur of bodies, faces and lights set to the screeching sounds of disaster. *Arrival* is equally large, as Gatson takes apart Hollywood's simplistic definitions of good and evil by slowing down a scene from *The Wizard of Oz* so that the Wicked Witch of the West's face



Rico Gatson, *Departure*, 2001.

seems to twitch with grief rather than unmitigated depravity.

This idea of complicating clear-cut notions of morality is brilliant, and all these works are among the most exciting, earnest and ambitious materials to come from artists under the age of 40 today. Still, by lacking explanation, the philosophical motivation underlying the videos is more enigmatic than a viewer might wish; and an entire exhibition of similarly edited videos risks becoming redundant. Gatson is capable of working poignantly in many media—recall the "Klandles" series of simple wax candles in the form of Klansman busts that he showed last year—and this show could have been more varied. Hopefully, Gatson will be slightly less obsessed with digital editing equipment in the future, and will have the faith to move into some terrain he hasn't already navigated.—Sarah Valdez