

Reality Reframed:
Recent Works
by Todd Gray



Todd Gray, The Quintessential Modern Artist



Todd Gray, *Euclidean Gris Gris (Scales of Injustice, No Respect)*, 2019. Five archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery.

Todd Gray's expansive oeuvre can most profitably be encountered as a systematic attempt to bear the burdens of what Friedrich Schiller considered to be 'the infinite task of modern art.'¹ According to Schiller, the task of modern art arises from the ineliminable tension between the inhumanity of Western modernity—owing to the ways in which our civilization is defined by social antagonisms, systems of impersonal domination, the ideological colonization of consciousness, and widespread instances of personal alienation—and the human spirit's universal longing to be at home in the world.² The modern artist must therefore attempt to "deal with two conflicting images and feelings, with the actual world as a limit and with his idea as something infinite."³ Although this paradoxical task is one that cannot in principle be completed, modern art, from this view, should enable us to critically reflect upon existing reality while fashioning ideal alternatives to it. The competing demands arising from its historical situation thrust modern art into a perilous state of affairs, which it can overcome only if it discovers a via media between two false options. The work of art may emphasize either the negativity of actuality or the moment of redemptive ideality. As it tends towards the former alternative it threatens to become a source of resignation. And as it tends towards the latter it risks degenerating into a utopian flight from reality. How then can actuality be artistically interrogated while presenting the ideal in plausible relation to it? As a diasporic cosmopolitan, Todd Gray has proven to be uniquely positioned to provide provocative and timely answers to this conundrum.

The diasporic individual initially finds himself rootless. He cannot be at home in the society where he was born because there he is condemned to suffer systemic mis-recognition. According to the founding myth of the nation his Black skin marks him as unoriginal to the territory. He is en-framed by the category of the perennial outsider. Yet the ancestral lands from which he ultimately originates long ago ceased to be a home for him. At this moment we must ask, to quote Heidegger, "does not the flourishing of any genuine work depend upon its roots in a native soil?" Heidegger goes on to contend that: "For a truly joyous and salutary human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into the ether. Ether here means the free air of the heavens, the open realm of the spirit."⁴ And yet we find in Todd Gray's momentous collection of photographic sculptures a singular achievement of creative genius.

Gray's creations form portals that transport the viewer through space and time, seducing them to unmask the brutal histories of Western world-making, to overcome the soul-crushing dualisms of bourgeois culture, to release themselves from the repressive bonds of hegemonic normativities, to recognize that the infinite complexity of the universe transcends the powers of technocratic rationality, to accept their responsibility as the ultimate sources of meaning, to discover the art of playing with the frames that define/confine us and our world, to find serenity in the lush undisturbed Ghanaian forest, to gaze in wonder at the erection of a new pantheon of Black deities, to become enchanted by the magic of the Gris Gris, to tap into the spontaneous powers of spirit that inhere below while projecting infinitely beyond rational consciousness, and to embrace the beautiful chaos of difference that is the true essence of existence. To bear soulful witness to Todd Gray's photographic sculptures is to embark upon a kaleidoscopic adventure guided by an artist who has interrogated the spiritual bankruptcy lying beneath the

ostentatious veneer of Western society and who has pictured new redemptive possibilities hidden to the imperial gaze while nevertheless viscerally present in the existing order of things. But how did a once rootless man come to forge such “truly joyous and salutary human works,” which have elevated him and his audience from earth to “the free air of the heavens, the open realm of the spirit?”



Todd Gray, *the hidden order of the whole*, 2021. Five archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery.

Todd Gray's forty plus years as an artist is the sublimated expression of his lifelong struggle to come to terms with the predicament of a people who were kidnapped from their paradisiacal homes, transported across the storm-tossed Atlantic in the bloodiest and most torturous process of forced migration ever implemented, and then compelled by the calculating whip of slave capitalism to produce much of the wealth that made America the richest and most powerful empire in history.⁵ How can a Black man make a home for himself and flourish in a society forged from the myth of white supremacy and Black inferiority? In the case of Todd Gray the story begins—as it does for so many Black Americans who achieve conventional forms of “success” in this country—with his parents instilling in

him the ambition, work ethic, and innovative zeal they knew to be necessary conditions of success for someone “occupying the margins in a racist culture.”⁶ As Gray notes, “[m]y brother Warren, and I were repeatedly told to be the best and become model minorities because this is the only way a Black man can succeed in racist America. We are both overachievers as a result.”⁷ It was this drive that Gray identifies as responsible for his ceaseless efforts at challenging the canons of art and photography. However, Gray's existentially necessary compulsion to excel cannot account for the specificity of his innovations in the fields of art and photography. The answer to this question is to be found in the biographical process through which Todd Gray discovered and weaved together a complex ensemble of roots from which his art would grow like those lush tropical Ghanaian forests that have become a recurring feature in his later work.

We can identify three organic paradigms serving as the sources of soulful sustenance for Gray's aesthetic praxis. We conceptualize these organic sources accordingly as “The Apollonian,” “The Bacchic,” and “The Demetrian.”⁸ The Apollonian paradigm refers to the critical theory tradition on which Gray draws to give his works their distinctive conceptual power. He first discovered the tradition in 1977 when he pursued a BFA at CalArts. There he read the

works of feminist, post-colonial, and Marxist thinkers. His education in this broad intellectual tradition continued when he returned in 1987 for graduate study. Working primarily with Allan Sekula, he came to be “greatly influenced by the texts of bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, Roland Barthes, and other thinkers engaging in post-colonial strategies and African Diasporic identity.”⁹ Later on Gray was introduced to the works of Stuart Hall, the pioneering cultural theorist and political activist. The artist acknowledges his encounters with the critical theory tradition as allowing him to acquire a social conscience¹⁰ and to recognize the necessity of decolonizing his mind.¹¹

The Bacchic foundation of Gray's praxis consists of the Black cultural tradition that he naturally inherited. This tradition is marked by its joyous, life-affirming passion for diversity, spontaneity, experimentation, movement, dancing, rhythm, improvisation, democratic openness, mystery, remixing, and innovation. Consider, for instance, the history of American music, where Black culture has been disproportionately responsible for many of the fundamental innovations in the field. It is Black culture that gave birth to the Blues, R&B, Rock n Roll, Jazz, Funk, House, and Hip Hop. The same dynamism can be found across the various cultural spheres in which Black people have made a home for themselves. Albert Murray offers a triumphant defense of the improvisational Black spirit thesis in his landmark work of cultural analysis, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*, when he writes:

*As for behavior or life style, no other people in the land have as yet evolved a characteristic idiom that reflects a more open, robust, and affirmative disposition toward diversity and change. Nor is any other idiom more smoothly geared to open-minded improvisation. Moreover, never has improvisation been more conditioned by esthetic values—or at the same time been more indicative of the fundamental openness that is the necessary predisposition for all scientific exploration! Improvisation after all is experimentation.*¹²

Murray goes on to demonstrate how the dynamic richness of the Black cultural tradition exposes the untruth of



Todd Gray, *Sketch (There Be Monsters Lurking In The House Within)*, 2021. Four archival pigment prints with UV laminate in found frames and artist's frames. Courtesy of the artist

the dour portraits social science researchers paint of Black people when their lives are assessed according to the normative standards of bourgeois white culture. These researchers never think to question either the value of those standards or their relevance as criteria for assessing “Black cultural forms of life”:

*When such improvisation as typifies Negro music, dance, language, religion, sports, fashions, general bearing and deportment, and even food preparation is considered from the Negro point of view, there is self, if ever, any serious doubt about how Negroes feel about themselves or about what they accept or reject of white people. They regard themselves not as the substandard, abnormal non-white people of American social science survey and the news media, but rather as if they were, so to speak, fundamental extensions of contemporary possibilities.*¹³

Finally we come to the Demetrian moment in Gray’s oeuvre, which refers to his Odyssean return to nature and his ancestral lands upon building a home in Ghana. The vitality of his expansive body of work derives from the complex and continually evolving ways in which he has weaved together these organic roots to feed his innovative aesthetic praxis.

Corresponding to these organic paradigms are two dialectically interdependent moments within Gray’s aesthetic program. These two moments, precisely because of the context in which they were born, offer themselves as a synthetic answer to the two competing imperatives constituting the infinite task of modern art. From Gray’s Appolonian foundations arise ‘an aesthetics of critique and resistance.’ And from his Bacchic and Demetrian foundations emerge his ‘aesthetics of spiritual transcendence,’ which helps reveal those oft-unseen redemptive possibilities percolating within the hidden order of the whole. In the course of doing justice to these two richly rooted aesthetic strategies, Todd Gray came to reinvent photography in such a way that he was able to imbue photographs with the aura of the work of art, an achievement that Walter Benjamin infamously declared to be impossible.

Regarding the Appolonian foundation, Gray singles out Stuart Hall as the most important intellectual influence on how he came to conceive of his aesthetic praxis. Hall’s intellectual achievements are wide-ranging and hard to summarize but we can highlight a few core ideas that are reflected in Todd Gray’s photographic sculptures. The two most crucial notions Gray borrows from Hall seem to be that of hegemony and resistance. Stuart Hall adopted the concept of hegemony from Antonio Gramsci, the early twentieth century Italian Marxist political theorist.¹⁴ According to Hall, hegemony refers to:

*all those processes whereby a fundamental social group, which has achieved direction over the decisive economic nucleus, is able to expand this into a moment of social, political, and cultural leadership and authority throughout civil society, and the state, attempting to unify and reconstruct the social formation around an organic tendency through a series of national tasks.*¹⁵

Hegemony is achieved as a consequence of a struggle between competing elements of the society seeking to occupy the commanding heights of the order. A particular group achieves hegemony over the social order when they succeed in imposing a unified system of economic, political, intellectual, and moral ideas on the rest of the members of society. This creates a fundamental division within society between “the essential group” that possesses control over the centers of political power, economic production, and cultural meaning-making and the series of subordinate groups over which it wields its authority. For Hall, following Gramsci,:

*hegemony is never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested... Hegemony is always the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle. It marks a shift in the dispositions of contending forces in a field of struggle and the articulation of that field into a tendency. Such tendencies... create the conditions whereby society and the state may be conformed in a larger sense to certain formative national-historical tasks. Thus particular outcomes always depend on the balance in the relations of force in any theatre of struggle and reform.*¹⁶

The concept of hegemony is formulated to comprehend societies as “complex formations, necessarily contradictory, always historically specific.” From his conception of hegemony, Hall develops a vision of the necessity and possibility of resistance. Resistance, Hall contends, is necessary and possible precisely because society is a complex formation, operating across multiple levels and spheres, composed of contradictory structures and tendencies, and featuring a plurality of ideologically differentiated social groupings, each engaged in an infinite process of contestation over the plural sites of hegemony.

Resistance is necessary because the social group that possesses hegemony exercises it with a systematic partiality towards itself and with a deep insensitivity to the full complexity of the order and the real effects of its dominion on social subjects. This is compounded by the fact that the exploitation, degradation, and repression subordinate groups suffer under the tyranny of the dominant group are unintelligible and incommunicable within the terms of the hegemonic normative framework so long as it remains uncontested. Instead, the meaning of the suffering of the subordinate groups becomes indicative of their failure to follow the rules, to live up to the standards of society, and to act appropriately. Within the hegemonic normative framework, the suffering of the subordinated is ideologically represented as justifying their inferior status and necessitating further repression. The only possibility for subordinated groups to come to terms with and communicate the concrete negativities the dominant group imposes upon them is to contest hegemonic normative frameworks. Failure to resist helps preserve the perceived legitimacy of the dominant group’s authority and leaves subordinated persons no choice but to make sense of their particular social situation and general social processes by relying on hegemonic frames.

Resistance is possible because of the open-texture of complex modern societies. There are three ways the incredible complexity of modern societies makes resistance possible and profitable for those who practice it. First,

it is impossible for dominant groups to totally repress subordinate groups in a complex society given the highly differentiated and decentralized character of such societies. Second, as Hall notes, we “have reached a stage of great complexity, in which the mobilization and consent of the popular masses is required to secure the ascendancy of a particular tendency.” Third, complex modern societies consist of an infinite plurality of spaces that are in principle capable of being transformed into sites where social subjects are able to critically interrogate hegemonic narratives, to formulate oppositional codes, to practice alternative lifestyles, and to participate in the production of counter-hegemonic cultural processes. Nevertheless, on Gray’s reading, “Stuart Hall thinks that we cannot overcome this immense hegemonic power, and our only power as individuals is to be in a constant state of resistance.”¹⁷

A significant part of why the hegemonic power of Western Imperialism proves insurmountable has to do with the self-reinforcing dialectic of discursive formations and sociological practices that define its socio-historical development. On one hand, the hegemonic narratives of Western society are complexity simplifying doctrines intended to be the frameworks in which knowledge is generated and communicated. On the other hand, through their capacity to mobilize social action they tend to bring about the world that corresponds to their categories. For example, consider one of the discursive formations that proved to be crucial in the rise of Western Modernity, referred to by Hall as “The discourse of the West and the Rest,”



Todd Gray, *Sketch (Rape of Sabine / Berlin Cathedral)*, 2022. Two archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist.

he explains, “[T]he West’s sense of itself—its identity—was formed not only by the internal processes that gradually molded Western European countries into a distinct type of society but also through Europe’s sense of difference from other worlds...” The development of this discursive formation is a complicated story but we can delineate its basic features. First, there is the moment of Western elites identifying a set of criteria by which to evaluate different forms of life that is itself based on a sense of the distinctive features of Western modernity. Next, they proceed to construct homogenizing pictures of the West and the rest of the world, with the latter being defined as devoid of all those features that are established in the first moment to be valuable. In fact, the rest of the world is pictured as populated by essentially uncivilized, irrational, and cannibalizing primitives. This leads easily to the conclusion that

the peoples of the rest of the world are woefully inferior to Western Civilization because of their difference from the Western form of life. As Hall describes this process, “Europe brought its own cultural categories, languages, images, and ideas to the New World in order to describe and represent it. It tried to fit the New World into existing conceptual frameworks, classifying it according to its own norms and absorbing it into Western traditions of representation.”¹⁸ Such a view is then systematically circulated throughout the population, especially among the emerging ruling classes. It succeeds partly because it appeals to the vanity of those who adopt the newly crafted Western identity and partly because by so thoroughly simplifying a complex social reality it makes the world readily intelligible and provides determinate answers to the question of what to do. Furthermore, seeing as the people being impressed with the new discursive formation have no direct acquaintance with the rest of the world, they lack any epistemic basis to reject it.

Having established that the savages of Africa and the Americas are not “true men” and that their lands possess immense riches it becomes possible to use “the West and the rest” discursive formation to justify undertaking national projects to conquer the inferior beasts, appropriate their wealth, and turn their bodies into instruments of surplus value production. This is a crucial chapter in the origin story of modern history, provocatively described by Fanon in the following passage:

*The colonist makes history and he knows it... The history he writes is therefore not the history of the country he is despoiling, but the history of his own nation's looting, raping, and starving to death.*¹⁹

The consequence of the colonialist construction of history is that the discursively posited hierarchy of Western civilization over the savages of Africa and the Americas becomes an objective reality from the standpoint of the very normative framework that legitimated the processes of its coming into being. Likewise, the successive attempts of social scientists to construct knowledge about the world by relying on this hegemonic discursive framework serves to reinforce its putative legitimacy, as the volumes of “knowledge” it conditions continues to grow. As Hall writes:

*This “West and the Rest” discourse greatly influenced Enlightenment thinking. It provided the framework of images in which Enlightenment social philosophy matured. Enlightenment thinkers believed that there was one path to civilization and social development, and that all could be ranked or placed early or late, lower or higher, on the same scale.”*²⁰

A crucial thesis underlying Gray’s protean panoply of photographic sculptures is that the impulse to simplify the complexity of existence by reducing highly heterogenous people to essentializing stereotypes typifies the hegemonic normative framework of Western modernity. For Gray, Western normativity constitutes a paradigm of complexity simplification. The tendency to simplify the complexity of existence is rooted in the desire to render

it intelligible and malleable so that it can be thoroughly subjected to the mastery of man. But there is a price the world must pay for the hegemony of the complexity simplifying paradigm of Western modernity, which Edgar Morin captures in *On Complexity*:

*Unfortunately, this mutilating, one-dimensional vision is taking a cruel toll on human phenomena. The mutilation wounds flesh, spills blood, spreads suffering. The inability to conceive of the complexity of anthroposocial reality, both in its micro dimension (the individual being), and in its macro dimension (the planetary collectivity of humanity), has led us to infinite tragedies and is leading us to the supreme tragedy.*²¹

Todd Gray's photographic assemblages counter the one-dimensional vision of Western hegemonic frameworks by supplying models that bring the complexity of existence back into view and make a dialogic encounter with difference possible and desirable. In order to do justice to the call to resist, and tapping into the improvisational spirit of Black culture, the artist found it necessary to rethink photographic practice from the ground up because in its traditional form it proved incapable of serving as an adequate instrument of resistance. In studying with his mentor, Allan Sekula—the legendary photographer, critic, and professor—the artist discovered that photography is “an instrument of control. Photography is a way for power to have a direct line into subjects, into us, into the masses; to formulate narratives that we don't question, because we think these narratives are something called reality.”²² This medium, Gray likes to point out, is a European invention rooted in Euclidean and Cartesian conceptions of rationality and was historically deployed by imperialist powers as part of their project of cataloging, categorizing, and propagandizing the non-Western masses they colonized. Of course, photography also has a long history of being appropriated by reformist and radical political movements. However, even when used as an instrument of counter-hegemonic struggles, it continues to trade on the illusion that it is an immediate representation of reality. What remains unseen is the work of selection, contextualization, and framing that goes into the construction of the photograph. The meaning a viewer finds in a photograph is a product of the interaction between the distinct interpretive schemas that inform the act of photographic production and those that inform its subjective reception. The photo, like its semiological cousin, *the fact*, never speaks for itself. Gray's three-dimensional photographic sculptures, consisting of juxtaposed images, drawn from distinct spatio-temporal contexts, and mysterious plays with frames that disrupt perceptual expectations, perform a dual service. They transcend the formal limitations and hegemonic bias of the two-dimensional, infinitely reproducible photograph while serving as provocative meta-critiques of the photographic enterprise.

This brings us to how Gray's photographic sculptures overcome the problem Walter Benjamin famously identified with photography as an art form. Benjamin argues that the mechanical reproduction of a work of art destroys its aura. The aura of an artwork consists of its unique existence in time and space, the concrete history it has undergone, and the specific cultural context in which it is encountered. The aura is the authenticity that only

the original work may possess and from which arises its sublimity. To truly feel the power of the work you must stand in its presence. Therefore, Benjamin asserts, no trace of the aura can be found in photographs given their

essentially reproducible character. There is no difference between an original photograph and its copy. However, in his practice Gray has found a way to imbue photographs with the aura Benjamin thought them incapable of possessing. They each form a unique object that bears the totality of their history in their visceral materiality. The artist's work demands concentration from the viewer. You must stand before it to trace with your eyes the interaction of images, the plays with color and light, and the choice and positioning of frames. What you see changes depending on your position in relation to the work. You become immersed in a way that cannot occur with a typical photograph. As Benjamin says, “A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it.”²³

Gray's formal innovations in the field of photography allow his works to function as a fertile site for the concrete contesting of hegemonic narratives. Although Gray intends on using his photographic sculptures as vehicles of political resistance they never devolve into propaganda. Rather his works, by attending to the complexities and mysteries of our existence, are offered as questions for the viewer to consider for themselves. In this way his creations are “an act of confidence in the freedom of men.”²⁴ He appeals, to paraphrase Sartre, to the viewer's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.²⁵ Contrast that with Western hegemonic narratives that have no respect for the individual



Todd Gray, *Atlantic (Keisha's Redemption Song)*, 2022. Four archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery.

as an autonomous meaning-maker, seeking instead to infect his entire consciousness with simplifying prejudices that overdetermine how he experiences and responds to social situations. However, Gray's photographic ensembles do not simply pose questions, they use beauty to seduce the viewer into undertaking an adventure.

In *Atlantic (Keisha's Redemption Song)*, 2022, as in Gray's other works on display, multiple images layer over and interpenetrate each other, suggesting the complex interdependencies of moments whose relations would never be considered when perceived in snapshot isolation. The artist links a picture of the Atlantic Ocean taken

from his home in Ghana to a picture of the Grand Rotunda of the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, which is a replica of classical Roman architecture, and to another picture, that of the Official Palace of Portugal. The latter is the authentic piece that the Grand Rotunda replicates. In this way, Gray intends on setting in relief the relations of interdependence between Europe and America forged through the Atlantic Crossings and continuing to this day. The palace itself came to symbolize the global ascendance of Portugal owing to its pioneering work in establishing the Atlantic Slave trade.²⁶ Gray's gesture at the act of imitation may suggest something about the derivative character of minds flattened by one-dimensional, Western hegemonic narratives.

Gray's piece already indicates by its title, a reference to Bob Marley's ode to spiritual healing, that it is not restricted to a playing out of the aesthetics of critique and resistance. Somehow a moment of redemption is to be found like "the rose in the cross of the present."²⁷ The redemptive moment is introduced through the image of Black American pop singer, Keisha Jackson. Covering her head is a picture of the cosmos taken from the Hubble telescope. A link is thereby drawn between the cosmos and the mind, suggesting the possibility of the self achieving transcendence and communion with the heavens through mindfulness. Or perhaps we're being invited to consider cosmic knowledge as a possible source of resilience in the face of the tragedy of modernity.

One may also draw a connection between the figure of Keisha Jackson and the Palace of Portugal. One of the key strategies of counter-hegemonic struggle is to work to effect a reconfiguring in the discursive field that de-centers the ideas, values, identities, and practices that are centered by hegemonic narratives and to try to center those it has confined to the margins. This strategic maneuver finds expression in Gray's aesthetic praxis of inverting the hierarchies constitutive of Western normativity, such as the high culture/low culture, mind/body, and reason/intuition divisions. In the case at hand, by conjoining the celestial heavens with the figure of Keisha and setting it off against the Palace of Portugal with ancient deities perched atop the columns, Gray appears to be calling attention to the divinity of Black creatives, or perhaps he is raising the banner for the collective construction of a new pantheon of Black deities. Likewise, the juxtaposition of the divine Black creative with the replica palace may operate on two levels. The first level suggests competing paradigms are at work between the Black cultural tradition and the hegemonic normativities of Western bourgeois culture with the former being distinguished by a spirit of innovation and the latter by a spirit of imitation. At another level, the viewer is invited to question the hierarchical positioning of the fine arts over the popular arts.

In *Nike D.O./Versailles*, 2021, Gray once again engages hegemonic hierarchies. This time by layering an image of Nike Davies Okundaye, the grand dame of Nigerian art, on top of a picture of Marie Antoinette's section of Versailles. Nike Davies is famous for her elaborate headdresses and for championing the folk arts of Nigerian culture. She has trained thousands of young Nigerians for free in the traditional methods of weaving and dyeing. The sculptural shape of Nike's pose, along with the references to Yoruba mythology weaved into her garments, when juxtaposed with Marie Antoinette's quarters, "the Petit Trianon," at Versailles raise the question of who ought to count as royalty. What

criteria do we use when we assign such vaunted titles as Queen to an individual? Why don't we ascribe the title of royalty to a woman who has effectively championed the traditions of her culture and helped raise a new generation of artists? Perhaps we might go further to consider not just the royalty but the divinity of Nike Davies. The image of the jungle inserted over her face creates a question and introduces a level of mystery. Is Gray contesting the bourgeois obsession with transparency and its assumption that everything is knowable? Or does the picture covering her face function as a shield to protect her subjectivity from the bourgeois tendency to reduce the other to a stereotype? Likewise, Gray might be encouraging the viewer to challenge the disenchantment of the world

effected by the enlightenment project and the industrialization process. What have we lost by driving out the idea that there is a world beyond rational knowledge, a super-sensible realm filled with spirits that commune with us if only we know how to listen? The fact that the photograph is of the jungle may suggest that a return to a spiritual existence requires a return to nature.

However we attempt to make sense of the multi-layered series of images, Gray's play of frames functions to obscure meaning and to interrupt the immediacy by which we assign it. His work forces us to take up our role as projectors of meaning and to reflect on what is required to bear this role responsibly. How often



Todd Gray, *Nike D.O./Versailles*, 2021. Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery.

do we see an image and immediately reach a judgment as to what it means? Now consider how you came to acquire the schemas by which the image appears as immediately intelligible? In many cases you acquired the schema unthinkingly from some external source such as the mass media. It is surely not possible to possess full self-conscious awareness of all the ideological elements determining our perceptions, but we nevertheless remain responsible for them because we can always exercise "the power of the negative." At any moment we can abandon a certain mode of thinking. Therefore, to not exercise this power is to allow ourselves to serve as an instrument for the forces of propaganda and ideology to confer meanings through us. Our capacity and willingness to engage in processes of critical self-reflection so as to render ourselves robust to hegemonic

normativities are further undermined by the distractive power of entertainment media. In contrast, complex works of art, with their high content density, disrupt our impulse to immediately confer a meaning that we unwittingly internalized by enticing us to absorb ourselves in the work and to tarry with the ambiguous meaning of what's before our eyes. When our power of judgment is so exercised it yields semantic determinations that preserve a degree of self-conscious uncertainty.

Todd Gray's work introduces the searching rhythms of improvisational jazz into the photographic form. He thereby affords us dynamic models for how we can disrupt alienating frameworks and revivify a world trapped within the Iron Cage of Western Imperialism. The Bacchic and Demetrian roots of the artist's aesthetics of transcendence



Todd Gray, *Golden*, 2023. Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist.

ensemble engaged in an ever evolving sonic exchange that makes use of counterpoint, tension, and productive interactive encounters between the “Bacchic,” “Demetrian,” and “Appolonian” tendencies of its artists. That the ever elusive redemptive possibilities for modernity can be found in the margins may be the enduring truth of Todd Gray's creative destruction of photography.

— Jacob J. Roundtree, January 2024
Lecturer, Johns Hopkins University

suggests that attunement to the spirit of Black culture and the enchanted realm of undisturbed nature are portals through which all may discover authentic modes of overcoming hegemonic normativities. In place of the divisive and arrogant frameworks erected by Western modernity, which daily prove their insensitivity to the complexity of existence, we might cultivate an infinite plurality of polymorphous individuals. Perhaps then we could finally achieve a cosmopolitan world. Such a world would not be founded on the Enlightenment ideal of a Euclidean geometric grid where everything has a fixed place in a rigid hierarchy. It would instead resemble a beautiful chaotic dance of differences backed by a jazz

Endnotes

¹ Schiller, Friedrich. “On Naive and Sentimental Power,” trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, in *Schiller, Essays*. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 180, 179.

² *ibid.*, 180

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 47.

⁵ Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

⁶ Gray, Todd. “Artist's Biography” in *Euclidean Gris Gris*, ed. Rebecca McGrew. (Pomona: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2020), 139.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ I draw here on Nietzsche's categories of the Apollonian and Dionysian moments in Greek art. See, Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

⁹ Gray, Todd. “Artist's Biography,” 140.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Murray, Albert. *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*. (New York: Library of America, 1970), 51.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. *The Prison Notebooks*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Studies and the Centre” in *Culture, Media, Language*. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1980), 35.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 36

¹⁷ Gray, Todd. “The Artist Remixing History, from French Gardens to the Cosmos” Interview by Travis Diehl. *aperture*, March 5, 2020 <https://aperture.org/editorial/todd-gray-travis-diehl/>

¹⁸ Hall, Stuart. “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” in *Essential Essays*, Vol. 2: Identity and Diaspora (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 158.

¹⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 15.

²⁰ Hall, Stuart. “The West and the Rest”, 175-176.

²¹ Morin, Edgar. *On Complexity*, trans. Robin Postel (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2008), 5.

²² Gray, Todd. “The Artist Remixing History, from French Gardens to the Cosmos.”

²³ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), 217-253.

²⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Denoon Cumming (New York: Random House, 1965), 376.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Thomas, Hugh. *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

²⁷ Hegel, G.W.F., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 23.

Image Credit

Front Cover: Todd Gray, *the hidden order of the whole*, 2021. (Detail) Five archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery.

Back Cover: Todd Gray, *the hidden order of the whole*, 2021. (Detail) Five archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery.

Jacob J. Roundtree is a postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Economy and Society at Johns Hopkins University. A political theorist by training, he writes on social theory and modern intellectual history. He received his PhD in political theory from Harvard in 2023. His dissertation is a critical genealogy of the social theories of Hegel and Marx that raises the question of whether freedom is possible in the modern world given the complexity of capitalism and the modern nation-state. He is currently working on revising his dissertation into a book, “The Politics of Absolute Freedom.” Roundtree also serves as an assistant editor at the interdisciplinary journal *Critical Review*, where he has helped organize special issues on themes in the field of intellectual history.

Reality Reframed: Recent Works by Todd Gray is curated by Anjuli Nanda Diamond and George Bolster. On view from February 22 until April 13, 2024. The curators would like to thank David Lewis Gallery, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, and the collectors that kindly lent works for this exhibition. *Reality Reframed* is part of an ongoing program related to the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation's mission of art and social justice.

THE 8TH FLOOR

The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.



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