

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song at Von Lintel Gallery Examines Cultural Issues

January 7, 2008

In 1971, Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* exploded onto the American scene. Huey P. Newton, writing about its impact in that year's June 19th issue of *The Black Panther*, qualified it as "the first truly revolutionary Black film made...by a Black man." Van Peebles, who wrote, directed, produced, scored, and starred in the indie film began his cinematic presentation with the words, "Dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man."

Thirty-seven years later at the Von Lintel Gallery in New York City, gallery director Collette Blanchard has organized an exhibition examining how African-Americans are represented in popular culture. Painting, drawings, sculpture, photography, video, and installation are the mediums employed. Running concurrent to the Kara Walker retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art, this show allows the public to experience the work of fourteen African-American artists, thereby giving exposure to different perspectives that widen the discussion about "black imagery."

The co-opting of "minority cultures" and "outsider" groups is an entrenched element of the American pop culture machine. Stereotypical attributes are used to sell and entertain the majority, at the expense of the "other." Native American ethnicity is tapped for sports logos and team names, Hispanic-accented voices are teamed with Chihuahuas for fast-food ads, a team of gay men straighten out a straight guy...the history is long and continuous.

In the gallery's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, the individual artists put their spin on how African-American culture has been appropriated. The extent to which the average American has become acclimated to these circumstances is revealed in a lack of awareness about how off this "reality" really is.

It should be noted that in the art sphere, there is a paucity of people of color in the decision-making roles of gallerist, curator, and museum personnel. For her part, Blanchard seeks to challenge the observer to examine "their preconceived ideas" and to "stimulate a conversation."

Titus Kaphar gets the ball rolling with his painting, *I still don't know how or why it ended like this* - but it all began when one of the older women called her blackness into question. Based on the Anthony van Dyck painting of 1623, *Portrait of Marchesa Balbi*, Kaphar uses the context of historical paintings to probe contemporary issues and concerns. The bottom three-quarters of the canvas has been obliterated by a coat of tar, with droplets on the gallery floor adding to the sense of immediacy. Questions abound. Did Kaphar paint a complete picture

and then black most of it out? Why the choice of tar rather than paint? The term tar baby...with all of its loaded implications; the history of tar and feathering...with the specter of mob violence, are two of the associations that come to mind.

Mickalene Thomas and Ifétayo Abdus-Salam undertake a reclamation of the black female body and attendant concerns. They accomplish this through their questioning of idealized beauty norms, sexuality, and the images that are put forth to portray black female celebrity.

Michael Paul Britto and Renee Cox exemplify how Madison Avenue and Hollywood have embedded racial metaphors into the collective consciousness. Britto assesses the minstrel tradition and the subliminal messages it has imparted to our country's psyche. In his digital video sculpture *I Need What You Got*, played out on dual monitors, he uses the 1930's icon Shirley Temple to delve into the ramifications of the "blackface" tradition. On the left monitor he features Shirley Temple in a black and white clip. She is wearing blackface, a bandana, and makes exaggerated facial expressions while shaking her head. On the right monitor, the prototypical "Topsy" character is shown, vigorously powdering her face until she is totally white. The sequence is culled from the 1903 silent film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where ironically all the major characters were played by white actors in blackface. Both are placed in speech bubbles. In the second set of images, Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, rendered in delicately colored thought bubbles, face off in gestures of "shame on you." Their true inner emotions reflect the conflict of identity issues.

Cox, who went head to head with former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani over her painting *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, presents *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben*. She reconstructs the use of archetypes as food branding in her 48" x 60" mounted archival photographic print. Using a backdrop of Aunt Jemima Pancake/Waffle Mix (albeit one with a "modern" model and not the kerchief-wearing Mammy) and Uncle Ben's Brown Rice boxes, Cox superimposes three powerfully built, real-life black superheroes. The central female figure stares straight out at the viewer; her male and female companions look upwards. Their arms are linked in solidarity.

Hank Willis Thomas contributes *Petey Wheatstraw: The Devil's Son-In-Law*. The work is from a series of photographs entitled "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America." The title of the piece references a 1977 movie in which the pictured black male played the lead role. The name of another film this actor appeared in is the basis of a word-play tag line for a product's ad campaign. Yet after Thomas extracts the company's logo, sales pitch, and copy content, what is left is a stripped down image that asks as much as it tells. For potential consumers of the merchandise, who may have no idea who this man is or how he contributed to a film genre over a quarter of a century ago, how does the photograph read? For those not in on the joke, what does it mean? It is a caricature in a vacuum, cut off from its own history.

Through Blanchard's intuitive installation, the various works interact and comment on each other. Artists riff on their own experiences, creating counterpoints while stating their specific point of view. It's not a final answer, but it is the beginning of a much-needed discourse.