



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

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**Todd Gray Expands the Boundaries of Photography
in MATRIX 186 at Wadsworth Atheneum**

Hartford, Conn. (February 26, 2021)— Todd Gray’s photographic assemblages explore the history and impact of European colonialism, slavery, and the African diaspora. These are personal subjects for the artist; his family has been unable to trace its lineage beyond three generations due to the legacy of slavery. Breaking the rules of formal presentation, Gray conceals and pairs imagery to take us on a complex journey about identity through Africa, Europe, and the cosmos, and through time and space. Framed individually in different styles of new, museum, and thrift-shop frames, the artist layers and stacks images in dynamic overlapping compositions. *Todd Gray / MATRIX 186* is on view March 4–July 18, 2021 at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

“Through his work, Todd Gray tells a personal and universal story of a fraught history of colonization and the enslavement of indigenous peoples,” said Patricia Hickson, the Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth. “While the museum was considering an acquisition of his work in 2019, it became apparent that a MATRIX project with Todd would be an opportunity for a more expansive dialogue on the subject.”

Gray juxtaposes images from his photographic archive amassed over the past forty-five years including African subjects, sublime landscapes, formally-designed European gardens, and dazzling Hubble Space Telescope constellations. Taken in locations from

the Netherlands and Portugal to Nigeria and Ghana (where he maintains a studio), Gray combines the photographs in compositions that engage the viewer in an exploration of the complex interrelation of Blackness, diasporic identity, and historic systems of exploitation.

For his MATRIX project, Gray embraces the experimental nature of the program to expand his practice creating his largest photographic assemblage to date, measuring more than 34 feet long. The work is titled *Sumptuous Memories of Plundering Kings*, a reference to the powerful who determine the official narrative over the powerless, as quoted in American scholar Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlanta Slave Trade* (2008). Fourteen photographs make up the work's visual narrative, their scale and imagery enveloping the viewer in a historical, cultural, and spiritual experience that directly connects with the contemporary discourse to face past and present transgressions. Gray further subverts the narrative by presenting some works resting on the floor and others with images oriented sideways or upside down. Four recent multi-part works accompany the new monumental assemblage in the exhibition.

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Todd Gray / MATRIX 186

Monday, March 8; 5pm

Join Gray for an opening tour of his MATRIX exhibition to hear more about how his work addresses the Transatlantic slave trade, the African diaspora, portraiture, and systems of classification. Free. Access link available via thewadsworth.org.

Curator Talk: Todd Gray / MATRIX 186

Thursday, April 8; noon

Curator Patricia Hickson leads a virtual tour of Todd Gray's MATRIX exhibition delving into the layers of history and interpretation that the artist stacks in his work. Free. Access link available via thewadsworth.org.

Panel Discussion: Todd Gray: Euclidan Gris Gris

Wednesday, May 12; noon

Professors Olubukola Gbadegesin of Saint Louis University, and Zeynep Çelik Alexander of Columbia University will present research about various themes Gray examines in his photographic assemblages followed by a discussion with the artist. Free. Register via thewadsworth.org.

About the Artist

Todd Gray (Born 1954, Los Angeles, CA) received his BFA and MFA from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). He began his career photographing rock bands and R&B acts. Between 1979 and 1983, he was Michael Jackson's personal photographer. Solo and group exhibitions include the Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; Whitney Biennial, NY; Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont; USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; David Lewis, NY; Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; National Portrait Gallery, London; Grand Palais, Paris among

others. Performance works have been presented at institutions such as the Roy & Edna Disney Cal/Arts Theater, REDCAT; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. His work is represented in numerous museum collections: Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; National Gallery of Canada; Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles among others. He was the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2019, and of a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency, Italy in 2016. Todd Gray's photo-based work explores issues of black masculinity, diaspora, and contemporary/historical examinations of power. Gray has presented this work in academic conferences at Yale and Harvard University. Gray works between Los Angeles and Ghana, where he explores the diasporic dislocations and cultural connections which link Western hegemony with West Africa.

About MATRIX

Inaugurated in 1975, MATRIX is the Wadsworth's groundbreaking contemporary art exhibition series featuring works by artists from around the world. From its inception, MATRIX has been a forum for art that is challenging, current, and sometimes controversial. Through clear explanation and thoughtful engagement with the viewer, MATRIX exhibitions call into question preconceptions about art and increase understanding of its possibilities. Many MATRIX artists, such as Christo, Byron Kim, Sol LeWitt, Glenn Ligon, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, and Carrie Mae Weems are now considered seminal figures in contemporary art.

Exhibition and Program Support

The MATRIX program is supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition. Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided by Newman's Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth Atheneum's five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: noon–8pm on Fridays, noon–5pm, Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is currently free. Hours and admission subject to change. Phone: (860) 278-2670; Website: thewadsworth.org.

Image caption: Todd Gray, *Sumptuous Memories of Plundering Kings*, 2021. Fourteen archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery, New York.