THE NATURE OF REALITY ACCORDING TO TODD GRAY

Todd Gray’s photographic assemblages explore the history and enduring impact of European colonialism, slavery, and the African diaspora. All are personal subjects for the artist, who has only been able to trace his family lineage back three generations due to the legacy of slavery. In his work, Gray exposes cultural hierarchies of power by juxtaposing contradictory images of African portrait subjects and natural landscapes with formal European gardens and monuments built on wealth acquired from the slave trade. The photographs derive from his extensive archive of images created over decades of travel in Europe and Africa. The dazzling Hubble Space Telescope constellations, sourced from the internet, contextualize our human insignificance in the bigger picture. A mix of new and used frames surrounds each photograph, which the artist layers and stacks in dynamic overlapping compositions. Breaking all the rules of formal presentation, Gray conceals, pairs, and subverts imagery to take us on a complex and critical journey about identity, humanity, history, and politics through Africa, Europe, and the cosmos, and through time and space.

Gray conceived this body of work while on a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Residency in northern Italy in 2016. Although the artist has long explored the subject of identity through photography, the magnificent garden designs and grounds at Serbelloni Villa expanded his thinking:

“I wanted to create a wider opening for folks to enter into a dialogue with my work, and I wanted to use beauty as a weapon. It was important to me to explore how the European gardens developed due to riches historically acquired through the slave trade and through African colonization. We see these gardens and we don’t realize where the wealth came from to create them. ... I thought it would be a wonderful way to seduce a viewer into looking at a photograph. I think the gardens are a way to talk about Western man’s need to control nature, bodies, surroundings.”

Gray titled the series Euclidean Gris Gris, which pairs “Euclidean,” the Greek mathematician’s system of geometry, which the artist aligns with European imperial garden design; and “Gris Gris,” a talisman of West African origin with spiritual powers to ward off evil, bring good luck, or cause misfortune to another. The combined term addresses the disparity between Africa’s natural and sublime landscape and Europe’s planned and manicured environment, the spiritual versus the intellectual. Gray explains:

“The ultra-rational form of thinking doesn’t allow for serendipity, spirit, or chance. Everything is premeditated, and everything has a 90-degree edge and hard corners. That kind of reasoning and thinking of Western ideology seemed present in the
gardens. Then I thought, ah, to contrast this with African bodies, to contrast this with the African landscape, to contrast this with the flora of Africa and put the two together, and let the viewer come out with what they will.”

But Gray found that he also had to adjust his own longstanding intellectual approach to his work:

“I have to be really sensitive to impulse, and I have to be really sensitive to spirit and allowing that to come into the work. I have to let my body have a conversation and not just think from my neck up. I need to unite the neck down and become whole, and not bifurcate. That’s when it became clear to me that I need to photograph these gardens, which represent logic and the Euclidean, and then the spirit, the gris-gris.”

Even more, as an African American man, Gray considered how he personally would have been received at Villa Serbelloni several hundred years ago:
“Would I have been here as a guest in the seventeenth century? Hell no. I would be serving. I realized this represents riches and power. I just kept unraveling that string until I realized that it’s not unique to Lake Como, Italy. This is the whole continent of Western Europe, and beyond. I wanted to see how this plays out in other European countries and examine the wealth extracted from colonies in India and Africa. That’s when I realized this is such a rich vein to tap.”

Five years later, Gray continues to explore and expand his narrative to incorporate photographs from additional travels. The works in his MATRIX exhibition include African images in and around Lagos, Nigeria; Johannesburg, South Africa; and several sites in Ghana. The artist first visited Ghana on a commercial job in 1992 and has now kept a studio there for approximately fifteen years. Among the European photographs are royal gardens and parks in London, England, and Paris, France. More recently, Gray has photographed European port cities active in trading and shipbuilding for their direct engagement with the trans-Atlantic slave trade; these include Lisbon and Porto in Portugal, and The Hague and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Gray’s ship imagery comes from these seaside sites.
The specificity of the sites associated with the images is not important to Gray; what each image signifies is the point. The blue and white tile image of a ship may not depict a slave ship, but a slave ship is suggested within the context of the composition. Gray recalled learning this lesson as a young student from his CalArts professor John Baldessari: “[He] taught me that a photograph was just a picture, a floating signifier whose meaning was not fixed but changes according to context.” Additionally, this particular ship image appears in several works in the exhibition. Gray repeats images from one work to another to connect the stories between compositions in the exhibition, and from one site to another in an ongoing, pervasive narrative about past and present power dynamics expanded to a global level.

To destabilize and upend the European narrative and Western mythology, Gray subverts his compositions in various ways, including the orientation of images. Some European photographs are positioned upside down, sideways, and even tilted off their axes. In turning a landscape vertically to a portrait position, Gray invokes the alignment of the body. He has also embraced an errant digital camera chip that resulted in photographic “glitches,” in which a series of African jungle photographs
became segmented and have unnatural, vivid color. The artist even breaks the norm in terms of presentation by resting some compositions on the floor rather than hanging them on the wall. Gray likens such techniques to surrealism—a language familiar to the public through popular culture—which contributes to the dynamic spin of the narratives.7

Above all, the intentional act of stacking framed images on top of framed images and of obscuring imagery breaks the rules and questions normativity.8 (Normativity is the societal phenomenon of designating some actions or outcomes as good or desirable or permissible and others as bad or undesirable or impermissible. A norm in this normative sense means a standard for evaluating or making judgments about behavior or outcomes.) Gray notes that breaking from Western standards and mental colonialism takes deliberate effort:

“I want to make the viewer conscious of how they are active players in constructing meaning. Meaning is interpreted by each individual and it’s projected on to the work. ... You are given the task to reconstruct and bring in your
narrative, your history, your understanding of what you’re looking at, and then name and create a narrative.”

The contemporary Black faces in the photographs are largely blocked from view, either concealed or in shadow, marking the unknowability of these subjects and the impossibility of knowing their experiences. We can only imagine. On the other hand, Gray also incorporates two well-known master portrait paintings of men of African descent in his assemblages. Dutch Renaissance painter Jan Mostaert’s Portrait of an African Man (c. 1525–30) is considered the earliest known portrait of a specific Black man in European painting. There has been some debate about who the work depicts, but ultimately his identity is not known. In the case of Spanish painter Diego Velázquez’s Portrait of Juan de Pareja (c. 1650), the sitter, his assistant, is known to have been enslaved to Velázquez for more than two decades. Pareja gained his freedom in 1654, continued to assist Velázquez, and had his own career as a portraitist. Although the Velázquez painting has been praised from its first viewing in Rome in 1650, the unequal relationship between Velázquez and Pareja is certainly problematic and unknowable.
While Gray uses portraiture of contemporary subjects and art historical icons in his works, his poetic titles move beyond the individual to speak to broader narratives. The work *Fair Game* (2020) bears the subtitle *Keep Your Head to the Sky*, the title of a 1973 song by R&B band Earth, Wind, and Fire. The lyrics begin with and repeat the term “Master,” setting up a narrative of enslavement, but the song’s subject focuses on keeping the faith to find peace. Gray’s largest work to date, the 14-part, 30-foot-long *Sumptuous Memories of Plundering Kings* (2021) borrows a term quoted in American scholar Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008). Her text considers the powerful and the powerless; the dominant narrative of the victor that triumphs over that of the defeated, which resides in the shadow. Like Gray, Hartman has been unable to trace her African ancestors and has lost a sense of identity.

*Though The Ship Is Sinking, Trade Winds Still Blow* (2021) invokes the trade winds and ocean currents that assisted early slave trade ships from African and European ports to make their journeys across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. *Cosmic Journey (1619)* (2019) connects a funeral procession of women in a Ghanaian fishing village
to the spiritual world through a Hubble Space Telescope image. The colors of the women’s clothing correspond to the twinkling stars. Gray notes, “For me, the Hubble galaxy images are a way for the viewer to step back and look at a broader view of our insignificance. For me, it lies in our humanity.”

Gray’s longtime friend, the artist Carrie Mae Weems, has beautifully described the essence of his work as follows: “[Todd has] come to understand something about who we are...through [his] decision to break the frame, to break the mold, and to then recombine, reconfigure, reimagine the consequences of history and the way in which it’s all framed and constructed.” History is constructed. In his work, Todd Gray reframes history and expands the possibilities of interpretation.

Patricia Hickson
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Todd Gray earned his BFA and MFA from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). Solo and group exhibitions include the Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; Whitney Biennial, NY; Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont, CA; USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, IL; Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA; National Portrait Gallery, London, England; Grand Palais, Paris, France; among others. Performance works have been presented at institutions such as the Roy & Edna Disney CalArts Theater, REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA, and the Hammer Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA. His work is represented in numerous museum collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; among others. He was the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2018, and of a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency, Italy in 2016.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 41.
4 Ibid., 37.
5 Ibid., 56.
6 Discussed by Gray in Ibid., 41.
7 Ibid., 46.
8 Ibid., 47.
9 Gray quoted in Ibid., 38.
11 Jan Janz Mostaert (Dutch, c. 1474–1552/53), Portrait of an African Man, c. 1525-1530. Oil on panel; 12.1 x 8.3 in. (30.8 x 21.2 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Some possible identities for the subject include Christophe le More (Christopher the Moor), an archer who was a member of Emperor Charles V’s bodyguard; Balthazar of the adoration of the Magi; and St. Maurice, a Christian soldier who was martyred. See the Rijksmuseum collection website for additional information.
12 Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1606–1670), Juan de Pareja, 1650. Oil on canvas; 32 x 27.5 in. (81.3 x 69.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art; Purchase, Fletcher and Rogers Funds, and Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), by exchange, supplemented by gifts from friends of the Museum, 1971. 1971.86. On his second and final trip to Rome in 1650, Velázquez painted his enslaved assistant Pareja’s portrait and the painting was exhibited at the Pantheon to much celebration. It was Velázquez’s first exhibited painting in Rome. Pareja gained his freedom in 1654 and continued to assist Velázquez, and later Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo, Velázquez’s son-in-law. There is not a clear history about Pareja. See the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection website for additional information.
14 Weems, in Euclidean Gris Gris, 50.
15 Gray quoted in Ibid., 51.
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Cosmic Journey (1619), 2019
Four archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames
79 x 71 1/4 x 7 in.
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith Fund, 2020.15.1

Present History (1619), 2019
Five archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames
88 3/4 x 150 x 12 1/2 in.
Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York

Fair Game (Keep Your Head to the Sky), 2020
Four archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames
44 1/2 x 47 x 3 3/4 in.
Courtesy the collection of Christopher Scott and Cody Fitzsimmons

Sumptuous Memories of Plundering Kings, 2021
Fourteen archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames
84 3/4 x 341 x 5 1/2 in.
Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York

Though The Ship Is Sinking, Trade Winds Still Blow, 2021
Five archival pigment prints with UV laminate in artist's frames
85 1/2 x 156 x 10 1/2 in.
Courtesy the artist and David Lewis, New York
ONLINE ARTIST TALK
with Todd Gray
Monday, March 8, 5pm

In his MATRIX installation, artist Todd Gray layers his photographs into large-scale collages that trace various processes of colonization across history and geographies. Join Gray for a guided visit through his exhibition to hear more about how his work addresses the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the African diaspora, portraiture, and systems of classification.

ONLINE CURATOR TALK
with Patricia Hickson
Thursday, April 8, noon

Todd Gray’s photographic collages are textured explorations of the legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the African diaspora, and colonialism. Join curator Patricia Hickson for a virtual tour of Gray’s MATRIX exhibition delving into the history and legacy that Gray bridges in his work.

ONLINE PANEL DISCUSSION
Todd Gray: Euclidean 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 Todd Gray examines in his monumental photographic collages in his MATRIX 186 installation including the trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperial gardens, classification systems, and colonial photography; followed by a discussion with the artist.

Co-sponsored with the Amistad Center for Art & Culture.