

African Affinities: Contemporary Connections, January 19, 2001-March 25, 2001

Despite the uprooting of African people from their communities and their dispersal as slaves, memory of African cultural practices survives wherever there are people of African descent. This exhibition of photographs from the Museum's collection presents the work of four contemporary artists -- Albert Chong, Reginald L. Jackson, Renee Stout, and Carrie Mae Weems -- who celebrate their African heritage in their art.

Each of these artists creates work that affirms the continuity of African culture in the Americas, especially African spiritual traditions. Jackson's *The Candomble Series* documents the persistence of Nigerian Yoruba beliefs in the Candomble religion of Brazil. Chong's *Thrones for the Ancestors* series is intended to "bring home the ancestral spirits" using multiple references both to African (especially Yoruba) and Chinese culture. Stout's contemporary drama of unrequited love, played out in *Red Room at Five*, alludes to a Haitian Vodou spirit based on a Yoruba deity. Weems's photographs from the *Africa Series* record the stunning architecture of Mali and are accompanied by a thought-provoking text that weaves together myths from many cultures.

The connection to African culture is one path to understanding this art. Like much contemporary art, the work is linked to diverse cultural influences and to personal biography. All the artists in this exhibition would likely concur with Stout's goal of "trying to create art that helps me put together what are only fragments, to try to create a whole, so that I can gain a better understanding of my own existence. In doing this, I hope that others, no matter where they come from, will realize some answers about their own existence."

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Carrie Mae Weems, American, b. 1953
A Place for Him, A Place for Her, Africa Series 1993
Gelatin silver prints with screenprinted texts
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1997.40



Since the late 1970s, Carrie Mae Weems has presented photographs with text in order to expose stereotypes about race, gender, and class. After producing a body of work in 1992 about the legacy of African culture among the Gullah-speaking people of Georgia and South Carolina, Weems traveled to Africa to learn more about her ancestral land, people, and art.

The photographs in this piece were taken during that African trip and depict the architecture of Djenne, Mali, one of the most beautiful and

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oldest cities in western Africa. Weems was astounded by the buildings, which she describes as having "male and female space... clearly presented in the structure of the buildings." Seeing these structures inspired Weems's musings on the creation of the first man and woman. She described her thinking as follows:

Myths are stories about the historical past that are believed to be true that tell us how the present world came to be. And as you know, human life began in Africa, so in this installation I play with these ideas. But fortunately, I'm an artist, not an ethnographer, so I blend my own myth with those of other cultures. Every culture has a creation myth and almost all of them begin with the battle between the first woman and man. I'm just playing it up in a different light.

Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (F), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98F

Renee Stout's art draws on African beliefs and practices, African-American traditions, and personal history. She is best known for her sculpture and installations incorporating found and constructed objects that deftly intermingle real-life stories, religious or cultural beliefs, and her own fantasies. Love and longing are major themes in her work. Although *Red Room at Five* is atypical in medium, it is entirely typical in content.

The piece was inspired by a friend's bedroom painted completely red and decorated with gold accents. Stout found it the perfect stage for acting out, in her words, a "short story." In looking at the series, we construct our own narratives from her performance. The small scale of the pictures and their intense color heighten the intimacy and anticipation expressed in the scene. The room itself will likely inspire viewers to fantasize about its owner.

The series also tells the story of Erzulie. Erzulie is a group of three female Haitian Vodou spirits tied to the African Yoruba goddess of love and sweet waters, Oshun. Allusions to Erzulie abound in Stout's work, and embossed on the portfolio cover for **Red Room at Five** is Erzulie's vévé, or symbol. Stout seems to play the role of the Erzulie Freda, described by one of the earliest writers on Haitian Vodou, Maya Deren, as "the divinity of the dream, the Goddess of Love, and the muse of beauty." Lovers repeatedly disappoint Erzulie Freda. She is sometimes associated with red dresses, which express her



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sensuality and sexuality. She craves perfume, candles, and things glittering and gemlike. Stout seems to adopt this character to assert her own desires and to take control of her dreams.

Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (E), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98E



Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (D), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98D



Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (C), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98C



RISD MUSEUM

Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (A), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98A



Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (B), 1999
chromogenic color print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98B



Reginald Jackson, b. 1945
Ogun, 2000
Ink-jet print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.36.1

Since the 1970s, Reginald Jackson has been using unconventional photographic techniques to document the vitality of African culture in the Americas. These photographs, taken in Cotia, just outside of Sao Paulo, Brazil, record a Candomble ritual. The Candomble religion derives from Yoruba beliefs that were carried on by the many Nigerian people who were transported as slaves to Brazil in the 18th and 19th centuries. Candomble shares the Yoruba pantheon of *orixá*, or saint-like figures.

A Candomble devotee belongs to many *orixá*, who offer protection and direct his or her life. Activities, eating, and dress may be influenced by one's *orixá*. During ritual ceremonies, a devotee's identity is displaced by the *orixá*'s through trance or spirit possession. The photograph on the right depicts Ogun, the *orixá* of war, iron, and metal craft. This deity is associated both with destruction and creation. The photograph on the left captures the dance of an initiate *orfilha de santo* (daughter of the *orixá*). Many *orixá* surround this central swirling figure.

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Jackson has heightened the dramatic contrast of his negatives through conversion to digital images and through the ink-jet printing process. His printing enhances the intensity of the experience he portrays. The way the rich, dark ink sinks into the bright paper also yields a shadowy quality that points to the entranced state of his subjects.

Reginald Jackson, b. 1945
Dance of the Filha De Santo, 2000
Ink-jet print
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.36.2

Albert Chong, Jamaican, b. 1958
Throne for the Justice, 1990
Solarized silver print
Walter H. Kimball Fund 1997.64

Albert Chong describes himself as "an artist using the tools of my ancestors to conjure their spirits for advice and protection." His ancestors are African and Chinese. He grew up in Jamaica and has lived in the United States since 1977, making photographs that speak to issues of identity, cultural affirmation, and the practice of creating imagery for the camera.

One of Chong's best-known bodies of work is his series *Thrones for the Ancestors*. Chong made the throne in this photograph for his father shortly after he died. His father was the Justice of the Peace in Kingston, Jamaica, and he was known simply as Justice. His father's portrait is on the chair seat surrounded by cowrie shells, rocks, and dreadlocks. Chong has often used cowrie shells because of their connection to African and African American culture, including their use as currency in the Yoruba culture, their use as embellishments in African art, and their adoption by African Americans as an icon of Africa. The dreadlocks, referring to Albert Chong's own hairstyle, make a personal connection to his father. When composing his thrones, Chong charts his own enigmatic world, blending altars from the Yoruba-derived Caribbean Santeria religion and many forms of East Asian ancestor veneration. As the art historian Kellie Jones has noted, Chong's interest in creating thrones is related to his Jamaican background. Jamaica is a bastion of West Africa's Akan culture, and the Ashanti, a group within that culture, use stools as altars.



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The haunting quality of this spiritual portrait is heightened by Chong's use of the Sabbatier effect (commonly known as solarization), a photographic process that causes a reversal of tones through exposing the negative or print to light during its development.