

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Primitivism Revisited: After the End of an Idea* by Sean Kelly Gallery

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## exhibition review

### Primitivism Revisited: After the End of an Idea

December 16, 2006–January 27, 2007

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

reviewed by Natasha Becker

In 1984 William Rubin, art historian, curator, and director of the Museum of Modern Art's department of painting and sculpture, organized "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" in New York. The exhibition traced the formal relationships between Western art and African, Pre-Columbian, Native American, and Oceanic art. The show was highly controversial and received solid criticism from the art community, in particular African art historians, for applying a notion of "primitivism" to non-Western art—evident in the description of African objects as "primitive" and "tribal" while Western art objects were described as "modern".

This event was important in stimulating critical thinking, research, and teaching in the United States on the problematic history of Western artistic engagement with the traditional arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native America and the function of concepts of "primitivism" as a tool in the work of twentieth century Western artists such as Picasso and Gauguin. Because this encounter took place at the height of Western colonialism, a number of racial, political, and representational issues came into play. The criticism generated by the Rubin show was incisive and since then art institutions such as MoMA have steered clear of the issue.

"Primitivism Revisited: After the End of an Idea" at Sean Kelly Gallery reexamined Rubin's historical exhibition in an attempt to directly address his now-controversial views. The exhibition combined critical thinking about African art history generated since the 1980s with contemporary exhibition practices to take on the question of the place of traditional African art today.

The exhibition was curated by eighteen graduate students of Susan Vogel, professor of African art at Columbia University and founding director of the Museum for African Art in New York. Over the Fall 2006 semester the students participated in a course on African art at Columbia, which was also called "Primitivism



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Revisited." In collaboration with Chelsea art dealer Sean Kelly, they reviewed the history of Rubin's show, conceptualized themes, selected works, planned exhibition layouts, installed the final show, and produced a catalogue. Professor Vogel facilitated discussions and debates and, along with Sean Kelly, sourced art work, but the outcome of the exhibition ultimately belongs to the student curators.

Together they created an exhibition showing classical African art from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia, among others, juxtaposed with a range of contemporary art by artists including Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneeman, Los Carpinteros, Alfredo Jaar, Elizabeth Peyton, Ann Hamilton, Yinka Shonibare, Gavin Turk, and Thomas Ruff.

On the whole, the exhibition was presented very well: conceptually and technically effectively installed. The student curators worked in pairs to create several thematic exhibitions, spread throughout the space of the gallery: "Primitivism: Then and Now," "Constructing Culture," "A Different Affinity," "Feitico, Fetisso, Fetish," "Limits of Looking," "Imagining Another," and "Manufacturing Authenticity." Various traditional and contemporary art objects, mounted on walls, pedestals, in glass cases, and on the floor, were assembled within these themes to suggest new pairings of contemporary and "primitive" art. Susan Vogel, in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, states that "If current contemporary art has any resemblance to Africa's classical art (and most does not) it is in artistic practice—not in form—and the parallels may be quite accidental."

"Primitivism: Then and Now," curated by

Risham Majeed and Margot Norton, was an exploration into the history of the notion of primitivism in the West. A timeline mapped out some of the major events within this history, such as the founding of the British Museum in 1753, Picasso's visit to the Ethnographic Museum in Trocadero in 1907, the 1914 exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York, William Rubin's 1984 "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" at MoMA, and so on. Beneath the time line, African art objects such as an Ethiopian cutting board and Songye, Dan, and Pende style masks were displayed. The inclusion of Luba style sculpture and Kota style reliquaries, for example, showed the eminence of and preference for such work in the West because their geometry and abstract styles corresponded to modernist preoccupations at that time. Contemporary work, such as David Doris's color photographs of quotidian African objects—a tray of eggs with red chilies positioned on top of the eggs to protect them from thieving spirits—connected a contemporary aesthetics of the everyday with the Yoruba assemblage ritual *ààlè*. This is the first exhibition space the viewer encountered on entering the gallery and it provided a powerful historical contextualization for the rest of the show.

Carolee Schneemann's 1975 *Interior Scroll* hung in the hallway, represented by photographs of the performance and the typed scroll the naked artist extracted from her vagina and then read to her audience. Her work was included to show how, without any knowledge of the work—that is, without the necessary contextualization of art objects—viewers are



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Opposite: Gallery 1, displaying "Primitivism: Then and Now."

This page, top: Gallery 2, displaying "Manufacturing Authenticity" and "Constructing Culture"

This page, bottom: Partial views of "Beyond the Display Case," "Feitico, Fetisso, Fetish," and "Limits of Looking."

unable to decipher them. By extension, without any knowledge of African art objects, the objects are inscrutable.

In "Constructing Culture," Huffra Frobes-Cross and Sarria A. Jass placed contemporary works by El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, and KD alongside traditional Xhosa style beadwork and a Lega style fiber hat to question the relevance of categories like "Western," "native," "African," and "European" in the construction of culture. This exhibition shared the same space with "Manufacturing Authenticity," curated by Kevin Dumouchelle and Jane W. Innis, which was concerned with the question of authenticity and how the Western desire for "authentic" images of African art is rooted in a primitivist discourse. The curators' statement, "You may not be looking at African Art," challenged the viewer's conception of and expectations about an "authentic Africa." Included were objects made in the Kongo, Makonde, Djenne styles, a Baman style tourist object, a Dogon hermaphrodite figure, and a Zulu style married woman's hat—some of which were exhibited in glass cases on white pedestals.

In "Imagining Another," Maika Pollack and Sara Urist Green interrogated the relationship between Europe and Africa through the concepts of fantasy, desire, and longing. Baule style spirit spouses from Côte d'Ivoire were exhibited with Thomas Ruff's huge blurred photograph of a pornographic nude, an untitled pile of candy by Felix Gonzales-Torres, Elizabeth Peyton's large painting *Piotr*, of a reclining male figure, and a small John Currin painting, *Tropical Hospital*, depicting a doctor ogling a nurse with big breasts. While concepts of fantasy and desire are certainly at play in all the works in one form or another,

the connections between these disparate works were not immediately clear. Even with the eloquent explanation provided by the wall text the conceptual link was weak in the face of such individually powerful, important, and different works.

Ultimately the exhibitions that comprised "Primitivism Revisited" had as a unifying principle the pairing of contemporary and classical African art objects in new ways. But this approach raises the question: If the traditional pairing of contemporary art and "primitive" art has come to an end after 100 years because contemporary private collections and

art institutions, in general, have abandoned the pairing, and because criticism of such ideas and exhibitionary practices have been so severe, then why was this exhibition doing it? If the idea of "primitivism" has indeed come to an end, would not an exhibition of classical African art objects *as art* in a contemporary art gallery in the heart of Chelsea have been the ultimate celebration?

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