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30 Americans

By Claire Breukel

The Rubell Family Collection museum remains one of the top attractions during Art Basel in Miami. I use the word museum, as the collection of work, the first of which was acquired in 1964, is of the stature of most world-class museums. That would make the acquisitions committee a family one, comprised of Don, Mera, Jason and Jennifer Rubell, aided by Director/Curator Mark Coetzee. With the lack of long-established museum spaces in Miami, this collection has filled the gap by presenting historically weighty and relevant exhibitions to the public, complementing this with a strong education program and gorgeously monumental library.

This appropriated role, however, has changed the way in which the collection handles its exhibitions. Beginning with "*Redeye: LA Artists from the Rubell Family Collection*," the collection has originated large single exhibitions that are both in-depth and expansive commentaries that reflect cultural, social, and often political ideas in our society. Using all 27 galleries in what is now a pristine white wall space, the museum focuses on purchasing a large selection of work from each artist, in order to show progression and give each one context in the greater scheme of things. This includes an extensive collection of Hank Willis Thomas' "*The B®anded Series"* from 1968-2008. Willis Thomas comments: "These works span an age from the death of Martin Luther King to our current elected president and through this kind of collecting, it shows the Rubells are in tune with American popular culture." In their introductory essay, the Rubells admit that the process of purchasing the collection has its restrictions- price, availability etc… and in an ideal world, it would be great to choose from all the works/artists out there. But there is no reason not to try.

As a follow up to the elections, "*30 Americans"* could come at no better time. Self described as a "critical mass of emerging African-American artists," the exhibition brings together thirty artists who simply have in common that they are African-American. Naturally when one hears this, alarm bells go off, but knowing the Rubells (having been a former intern), I know there is a method to this perceived madness. Walking through the giant rooms, the method starts to become apparent. As part of the "all-encompassing" approach, one can see masters such as Robert Colescott and David Hammons, representing the post-modern 1960's/1970's. These are adjacent and juxtaposed with artists, such as, Nick Cave, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, and the Marlene Dumas-esque work of Noah Davis. The latter are younger artists I have known for a while, but never placed in the context of race/culture/identity; and they start to become more real as artists, as if this context makes apparent an important part of their personal history. Franklin Sirmans, in his essay for the "*30 Americans"* catalogue, succinctly clarifies: "In consideration of Thelma Golden's 2001 exhibition, "*Freestyle*…" that posited the fact that a show of black artists could in fact be post-black in subject matter, this presentation also questions the term and wantonly throws it into flux. The art at hand is wildly different in materials and themes, though it does offer hints to an assembled collection of a cultural consciousness." Without the inclusion of any clear subtexts and an even more general exhibition title that refers to thirty seemingly random Americans (in itself a

commentary on the role and significance of African-American history to America in general), we rely on the fact that this consciousness does exist.

So, for the purpose of talking about the work, I am going to assume this collective cultural consciousness does exist in this way.

David Hammons' "*Esquire (John Henry)"* is an emblematic work. It is a minimalist sculpture piece comprised of a large stone resting on a can of Esquire black shoe polish, which in turn rests upon an upturned piece of iron railway track. The top half of the stone is covered in dark hair collected from a barbershop in Harlem, giving the rock the presence of being a face. From the title, we assume it to be that of folk hero, John Henry, who as a 19th century working-class figure, beat the machine that was about to take over his job, leading to his death.

In the gallery, around the corner from Hammons, is Gary Simmons' installation "*Duck, Duck Noose*." Born twenty-one years after Hammons, Simmons' work is as political and as charged. A circle of nine chairs, on which rest Ku Klux Klan white masks, surrounds an ominous noose. With contemporary art being what it is today, this symbolism is obvious and trite, but its presence still reverberates with tension.

Moving through the exhibition, it is apparent that "*30 Americans"* is investigating cause-and-effect channels of influence between the younger and the more established generations. There is a depth of progression and juxtaposition. Coming across the works of some younger generation artists, there is fascination with pop culture and its current relationship to the identity of African-Americans. Mickalene Thomas' characters in "*Hotter Than July"* and "*Feel Like Makin' Love"* are reminiscent of 70's pop posters- the glitz of the enamel and rhinestones with the overacted poses and lush fabrics make the stereotypes of "Afro-cool" seem absurd. Similarly, the lavishly-adorned "*Sound Suits"* by Nick Cave are absurd constructions made of a variety of scavenged materials that rub together and create noise when worn. Cave made the first suit in response to the beating of Rodney King in 1991. The works are garments that embody cultural politics, identity and a sense of activism through their performative (and thus disruptive) quality.

The easily-identified works of Hank Willis Thomas play with the stereotypical association of the black male body to sports. A Nike tick scarred onto a shaved head in Branded Head connotes slave-branding to determine ownership. In the work "*Basketball and Chain"* a shackle connects a jumping basketball-shoe-clad foot to a basketball. And finally, in the work *"An Unidentified Jamaican Boy Uses the Puma H Street Running Shoe to Run for his Freedom 2003/2005"* Willis Thomas again uses advertising language to talk about commerce and the economy and its relationship to the black male identity. Ironically, the exhibition is sponsored by PUMA. Willis Thomas responds: "My work is an artist's critique of how corporate America has imaged African-Americans…this (sponsorship) speaks to the relationship between the art world and the commercial world as sponsorship and culture have become interrelated." Is this a problem? He responds: "That's America!"

Referencing the exhibition title, the Rubells explain: "It is called *30 Americans,* 'Americans' rather than 'African-Americans,' because the issues raised by the works in this show-race, class, gender, identity, among others-are at the core of the American experience." Can we then assume the issues surrounding

race/class/gender/identity are common among all people living in America? Which leads to the age-old question- Can the African-American experience and voice be heard through an exhibition not curated by an African-American? I can't resolve these questions, but huge credit is due for having the courage to accept the contentious issues surrounding such an exhibition and to tackle it anyway. In a post-post era *"30 Americans"* can only help us get closer to redefining who we are, both as individuals and as a nation. With over 200 works of art to draw from, the Rubell Family Collection offers an exhibition that is provocative and questioning and not-to-be-missed. The exhibition is on view from December 3, 2008 - November 28, 2009.

Claire Breukel: Curator and art critic. Since 2006, she is the Director of Locust Projects, a renowned Miami-based non-for-profit specializing in alternative contemporary exhibitions.