

Art in America

April 2000

Radcliffe Bailey at Jack Shainman

In this new body of work, Atlanta-based artist Radcliffe Bailey plays dynamic movement around a still center. As a whole, these monumental canvases are full of activity—snatches of grid underlie sinuous lines and tangled marks that suggest diagrams, road maps, networks of synapses or meandering plant tendrils. The center of each painting, by contrast, brings this controlled chaos to a halt. Embedded in each work is a rectangular glass box containing a black-and-white photograph. The photographs are of two sorts. Some are tintypes that belonged to Bailey's grand-

mother depicting relatives whom he cannot otherwise identify. These offer formal portraits of an African-American middle class from the late 19th century, with sitters arranged against painted backdrops and architectural props in the manner of the day. The others, taken by Bailey himself, are sepia-toned depictions of figurative sculptures from the High Museum's collection of African art.

The wild, syncopated patterns of the surrounding painting become giant frames which counterpoint the stillness of the images. The boxes suggest reliquaries or displays of ethnographic artifacts, a quality

which is sometimes enhanced by the presence of other objects, such as exotic insects pinned to pillows, glass bottles filled with roots or seeds, or even, in one case, a chicken claw.

The disjunction between center and frame suggests the break between memory and the flux of immediate experience. The photographic images are deliberately out of context—as African ritual sculpture always is in a museum setting. And indeed the sculptures are shot to reduce their legibility. The portrait photographs are

far more readable, but even these seem enigmatic—evidence of a social atom which has been poorly incorporated into our national narrative.

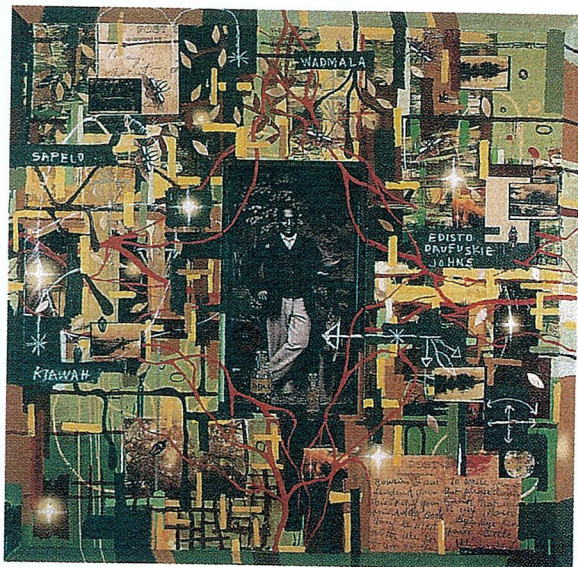
The figures in the portraits wear silk dresses, decorous bonnets and well-pressed suits and uniforms, and seem very much assimilated into the society in which they live. Yet the mysterious bottles and the pulsing lines and nature-derived emblems snaking over the surrounding frames are full of a shamanistic magic which links them to their African ancestors.

Despite the carryover of motifs and symbols from painting to painting, each work embodies a particular theme. In one, the photo features a black soldier in a Union army uniform posed formally

before a painted backdrop. The frame that surrounds him is ornamented with painted banners containing numbers: 54th, 38th, 7th, etc., presumably referring to the regiments to which he might have belonged. Overall, the colors of this painting are darker than those of the others, creating an elegiac quality.

Bailey's work has been compared to that of such artists as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Raymond Saunders, but he is clearly his own man. These works blend past and present with an electric energy that brings history back to life.

—Eleanor Heartney



Radcliffe Bailey: *Untitled*, 1999, mixed mediums on wood, 80 by 80 by 5 inches; at Jack Shainman.