

Radcliffe Bailey
Edith Newhall
ARTnews June 2013
reviews: national

from salvaged windows offer a sculptural meditation on Arctic explorer Matthew Henson, who may have been the first person to reach the North Pole. The construction glazes with a ghostly blue bioluminescent light that evokes the alienation of Henson's frozen environment. The 2004 video *Swamp*—part of "Black Beethoven," a series addressing Beethoven's rumored Moorish ancestry—begins with an image of Joseph Karl Stieler's 1819 painting of Beethoven filling the screen. Screen far-screen, the wild-haired German composer looks just as contemporary audiences imagine him—and Adorno's digital



See Also: *Swamp* (New York, 2004, video, color, and light, 50" x 30" x 40").
New Orleans Museum of Art.

discussions slowly, almost imperceptibly, turn the painting into a photograph of a black man dressed and posed exactly like Beethoven's subject.

Adorno's enigmatic career as a critic has long shaped his practice, influencing his subject matter and making performance an integral part of his art. The sculpture *Of Mirror* (2004), which also belongs to the "Black Beethoven" series, resembles a giant music-box cylinder, and it resonates with a terrible clarity every 30 minutes. While alluding to Beethoven's hearing loss, this open-ended piece allows for multiple interpretations, as always with Adorno's work. —*Lauren Wachob*

"L'Alfika"

See Also: *Swamp* Museum of Art
New Orleans

Curated by Ted Engberg at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and organized by New Orleans by Miriam Leah, "L'Alfika"

presented nearly 80 installations, paintings, photographs, drawings, and videos made since the 1960s by the likes of Thomas Demand, Ai Weiwei, Chuck Close, and Andy Warhol. Using synthetic materials, exaggerated scale, humor, and illogical devices, the works on view experimented with viewers' perceptions of what is real and what is not.

Many artists engaged with Freud's idea of something familiar seeming inexplicably foreign, false, or artificial. Some might have mistaken Yoshitomo Nara's *Woods* (2005-'07) for actual vegetation growing from a crack in the gallery wall. But a closer look revealed a small, orange Ford painting on wood. And Neil Sims expertly executed white marble sculpture *Holy 2-Py* (1979-81) looked like a bulging plastic trash bag on the floor, seemingly left behind by a cleaning crew.

Other artists explored the relationship between the human body and the modern environment. Ben Mosch's mixed-media sculpture *Crouching Boy in Mirror* (1999-2000) was so convincing here that it actually startled museumgoers, who thought the young figure staring at his own reflection was alive. And Evan Penny's larger-than-life (2001) *No One in Particular #4, Series 2* (2001), a hyper-realistic silicone bust with actual human hair, depicts an aging man whose heavy skin and sunken eyes suggest years of



Jonathan Jagger, *Swamp*, 2010, wood on brass, 50" x 20" x 20". New Orleans Museum of Art.

wear and struggle. Other contributions recast utilitarian items that receive little notice in our daily lives in striking, monumental proportions. Jonathan Seliger's nearly nine-foot-tall enamel-on-brass milk carton *Heartland* (2010), to name one, is painted and lettered in exquisite detail, complete with a June 13, 2010, expiration date.

Ultimately, the works in this show (which opens at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, on June 23) transform bits of the mundane into objects that provoke reflections about life in an increasingly technological and automated world. —*John R. Kemp*

Radcliffe Bailey

Bridgette Mayer
Philadelphia

Initially celebrated for his "medicine cabinet" sculptures of African spiritual objects, Radcliffe Bailey has since expanded his practice to include painting and installation. "Notes," his first show with this gallery featured powerful works in a wide range of mediums and demonstrated his ability to conjure, and then subvert, an atmosphere of history and tradition.

The show opened with a selection of small, framed gouache paintings on pages of sheet music from the series "Notes from Tervuren," which was partially inspired by the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. In these delicate works, carved-wood Congolese figures explore wild and exotic nautical settings, wryly alluding to the journeys of African slaves to the New World. Bailey's use of sheet music rather than paper adds another layer of reference to the complex history of colonial exchange—in this case, the strong influence of African music on music in the Americas.

In the rear gallery, wall-hung vitrine sculptures, again addressing slavery, evoked the format of ethnographic museums. In *Currency* (2011), a photograph of a carved African figure is displayed in a glass case like an artifact but enlarged to the scale of a human child. A leather strap decorated with brass bells is draped over the frame—simultaneously suggesting a historical object and a dog collar waiting to be filled.

Bailey's African American muses—the scientist, the musician, the blacksmith—



Radcliffe Bailey, *Notes from Tervuren*, 2012, gouache, collage, and ink on sheet music, 12 1/2" x 9 1/2". Bridgette Mayer.

are always present in his work, and the trickster, one of his favorites, was given the gallery's vault space as his stage. In front of a found vintage photograph of an elegant 19th-century magician in a suit and top hat, an expert three-dimensional cardboard facsimile of the hat turned upside down sat on a pedestal, revealing its inner lining of rabbit fur and feathers. For a moment, the history of African folklore seemed eerily alive in the gallery. —*Edith Newhall*

Mie Ollse

Beetle Books
Manhattan

Continuing New York- and Copenhagen-based artist Mie Ollse's investigation into abandoned spaces and structures, "Crystal Blue of Dust" featured ten mostly large-scale canvases, all painted in acrylic with the addition of water from the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. Inspired by Robert Smithson's 1967 article for *Artforum*, in which he documented the mine along New Jersey's Hackensack River, Ollse's monumental works illustrate and immortalize the decaying economy of that polluted New York City waterway.

In her work, Ollse has explored sites as desolate as a ghost town in the Arctic Circle and a crumbling Berlin amusement park. The slummy canvases here possessed all the hallmarks of her painting, uniting flat swatches of background

pigment with controlled textured splatters and vivid yet gestural figuration. In *Gowanus Canal* (2012), a coral-colored lone canoe slams against a dock suggests a romantic Venetian gondola. The collapsing structure of *Concrete Plant* (2012) holds all the exotic allure of a medieval tower, and the Renaissance Revival-style residence in *No Whole-food House* (2012) could be the set for an old-fashioned debutante ball, with a bell-shaped chandelier suspended from above like a lifeline.

Beyond its symbolic presence in these works, the canal water acts as paint thinner. By diluting the artist's pigments, it enables viewers to see Ollse's white-bristled brushstrokes, which mirror the planks of the ruined houses, bridges, docks, and boats she depicts. In these exquisite canvases, the faded grandeur



Mie Ollse, *No Whole-food House*, 2012, acrylic and water from the Gowanus Canal, 50" x 50". Beetle Books.

of old architecture and a touch of the secondary take over what is its reality is partly of gray, sometimes. —*Catherine D. Angerer*

Helen Frankenthaler

Museum of Modern Art
New York

This intimate show presented five works made by Helen Frankenthaler in the 1950s. While her early Color Field paintings from the '50s feature thin washes of ground paint, banishing the brushstrokes in favor of the stain, these large works on paper play with the texture of layered pigments as well as juxtapositions of color.

Working with handmade paper and soft, dusky inks, Frankenthaler scored,

pocked, and mottled the surfaces of the prints, occasionally building up simple lines and circles with wax. But unlike the aggressive process of her action hero predecessor Jackson Pollock, Frankenthaler's gestures tended to reinforce the meditative mood of her pictures. In the 1980 woodcut *Comes*, jagged slashes and striations hum over a quiet blue backdrop, but it's the blue that keeps drawing the eye back in. Next to those sparse disturbances on the surface, the unmarked expanses of color somehow feel the most full.

The show's standout piece was the red copper bar relief *Bird of Paradise* (1966-68), which leaned against a wall. Towering over the room at just over eight feet tall, the work heightened the tension between form and fluidity, strategy and release, that lurks in Frankenthaler's paintings and prints. Like a giant sculptural landscape, the work is covered in thick strokes of wax, may copper, gold, and nickel like wax or clay. Frankenthaler made every inch, from the soft yellow washes to the piece of tape lodged in the lower left corner, baroque and tactile, treating metal as a substance as pliant and expressive as paint. Although the sculpture here was almost too small for a show, it's a credit to Frankenthaler that her rich surfaces reward even the longest looks. —*Lauren Anderson*



Helen Frankenthaler, *Bird of Paradise*, 1966, relief on handmade paper, 60" x 61". MoMA.