Matthew Angelo Harrison

With objects from the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
“In what tense does one write an ethnographic account? This grammatical detail has considerable intellectual and political significance.... To many readers, using the past tense about an out-of-the-way place suggests not that people ‘have’ history but that they are history.”

–Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993)
Quotidian Pasts, the second chapter of the exhibition series Colored People Time, reconsiders the trafficking of blackness through colonial practices of collecting, commodifying, and exhibiting people and objects from the African continent. Produced in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, this exhibition examines early-twentieth-century ethnographic practices—and the legacy they left behind in museums—as acts of white supremacy. As anthropologist Anna Tsing has suggested, the seemingly simple act of conjugating a verb in the past tense has powerful political ramifications when describing a non-western subject. This act of objectification through language is placed on display through archival materials from the Penn Museum.

The long history of the exploitation of both the African people and their cultures is told, in the exhibition, through the configuration of a few small objects—a photograph, a journal entry, a letter—and a CBS television show. These archival materials, which range from 1930 to 1968, document key histories and biographies, from the birth of anthropology and ethnographic research in universities and museums to the height of PanAfricanism.

At the center of this exhibition is a newly commissioned installation by the artist Matthew Angelo Harrison. Harrison’s 3D-printed works are manipulations of a selection of sculptures held in the Penn Museum’s collection from six countries: Angola, the former Benin Kingdom of Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

By pairing Penn Museum’s archival materials with Harrison’s contemporary sculptures, this exhibition challenges us to question how we see and make meaning of “authentic” African sculpture and how we assign cultural and commercial capital and value on African objects. These complex conversations are sited locally, here, in West Philadelphia. Quotidian Pasts is a reminder that history never occurs in the past tense, but is present with us in the here and now.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator, and Monique Scott, Director of Museum Studies, Bryn Mawr College
I was drawn to CPT as both a living and liberatory phrase. It has provided a linguistic tool for black people to navigate their own temporality, within and against the construct of Western time. Not surprisingly, white supremacist logics have attempted to distort and co-opt CPT, constructing a dual meaning through racial stereotype. In spite of this, CPT has remained part of the vernacular of racially marginalized groups, to think and act differently in time.

Colored People Time, structured as an experimental exhibition in three chapters—Mundane Futures, Quotidian Pasts, and Banal Presents—unfolds over the course of 2019. Within the exhibition, I want to explore the plural and malleable nature of the term. CPT connects to the tradition of black expressions grounded in counter-language, ones performed as part of “resistance discourse, created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class.”

Like the constructs of race and gender, time is an experience and subject that escapes the limitations of language. The artists represented within this exhibition include: Aria Dean, Kevin Jerome Everson, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Carolyn Lazard, Dave McKenzie, Cameron Rowland, Sable Elyse Smith, and Martine Syms; accompanied by historical objects from the Black Panther Party, Sutton E. Griggs, the National Institutes of Health / Getty Images, and the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is through these works that we are invited to reconsider the singularity of Western time and bear witness to the everyday disruptions that restructure and reorganize black being in the past, present, and future.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator

EXHIBITION WORKS

Matthew Angelo Harrison

Queen Mother (Edo, Oldman) 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum
Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Queen Mother adapted (Edo, Oldman) 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum
Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Sowei Actuation (Bundu, J.L. Buck) 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum
Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Seated Female (Kisi, J. Laporte) 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum
Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Amandus Johnson in Angola. At encampment with natives and other explorers. [n.d.]
University of Pennsylvania Museum Photographic Archives; Standard Size Prints; Africa, Box AF 4: Amandus Johnson in Angola; Penn Museum

F16-4023 "African Heritage" 1968
Digital video transferred from 16mm film, color, sound, 27:9 min.
Courtesy of the Penn Museum

WHAT IN THE WORLD 4 c. 1952
Digital video transferred from 16mm film, color, sound, 28:28 min
Courtesy of the Penn Museum

Collection of African Specimens arranged in Ethnographical Groups. Price L865.00 [n.d.]
Director's Office, Gordon; W. O. Oldman; Penn Museum Archives
SUGGESTED READING


Related Programs

Friday, April 26
Members Preview, 5PM
Public Opening Celebration,
6:30 PM

Wednesday, June 5, 6:30 PM
Film Screening with Maori
Karmael Holmes

Wednesday, June 19, 6 PM
Curator-led Tour

Please visit icaphila.org/calendar
for more upcoming events.
#quotidianpasts

Credits

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at Bryn Mawr College. A fully illustrated catalogue will be pub-
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