THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Dr. Charles Smith

SEPT 2022

By Andrew Paul Woolbright

Installation view: *Dr. Charles Smith*, White Columns, New York, 2022. Courtesy White Columns, NY. Photo: Marc Tatti.

On View

White Columns
Dr. Charles Smith
July 8 – September 10, 2022
New York

There's an enchantment one feels with Dr. Charles Smith's work. Whether it is the sheer expanse of his world building or the peculiar levity he has developed as an aesthetic, it can prove challenging to interpret his practice beyond the initial impact of its immersive charm. As you walk up the stairs of White Columns, you initially encounter a wall-sized image of Smith's house and front yard that he has transformed into a memorial dreamscape. Presented with the scaling affect of Smith's immersion, it is possible to miss an important point. Camouflaged by the impressive spectacle, in the corner, standing in front of the wall image, stands a small figure. He has gray skin like an old black-and-white photograph and he holds a camera on his head that is pointed at us. Seeing the word "smile" written on his chest, we are made aware that the looking and documenting goes both ways here. You can miss that the name of the figure is *Emmett Till* (2022).

The concrete of Smith's figures offers surfaces that make each sculpture look like a scaled-up claymation figure, as if their dimples and bends are the product of massive thumbs. To follow Gombrich's understanding of the portrait, Smith's work is more schema than representation. The good portrait, according to Gombrich, "is not a faithful record of a visual experience but a faithful construction of a relational model." Smith's idiosyncratic depictions privilege uniformity over recognition of the individual, and his overarching style builds a fascinating tension that is only disrupted by the charge of the titles of each work. In addition to *Emmett Till*, there are memorial figures for the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina and by Agent Orange in Vietnam. One is named *What The Slaves Saw When They Were Brought Up From the Bottom of the Ship* (2022) and each of the figures eyes are painted a wondrous sky blue. The divide between schema and representation, the lack of precise mimesis, makes each figure a vessel of transference, operating according to the logic of sympathetic magic and the earnest desire to evoke the spirit of something and ground it in form. They feel close in proximity to the sigil relationships of Hopi Kachina dolls or the figures of Tell Asmar.

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A thematic undercurrent throughout the exhibition is the role of the witness. The presence of figures like Paul Robeson, Diana Ross, and Iceberg Slim present dynamic manifestations of the will to shape and image Black culture through literature and music. However, it is the literal presence of the camera in the exhibition that ultimately provides its larger context. The photographer Gordon Parks is a recurring figure. Holding up an analog camera to document Moms Mabley, or a young boy blowing taps for the children of Uvalde, Texas, his presence suggests a commitment to agency in the representation of African American culture. In bell hooks's essay "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," she retrieves the aesthetic counterhistory of Black photography, framing the photo albums of African American homes as a parallel visual current to modern art. Knowing that the circulating images of culture shape us as much as we create them, the ability to represent and archive the local, the domestic, and the communal presents an important language of resistance and preservation, specifically in historically marginalized and dispossessed communities.

Revealingly, Gordon Parks isn't the only one documenting what he sees: Mother Consuella York and, as mentioned previously, Emmett Till, are both conspicuous in this regard. While Mother Consuella York and Gordon Parks bore witness to the overt and covert systems of racism in our history, Emmett Till holding a camera reminds us of something else. Till didn't choose to be a part of our collective history, or to become an image—it was imposed upon him as he was horrifically lynched. In one of the most significant decisions in the exhibition, Smith gives Till the chance to be the one holding the camera, and the agency to be understood on his terms.

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Smith’s choice to make significant historical figures within African American culture difficult to recognize without their names does something profound. None of them offer pathos, or betray the gravitas or glory of their origins, which refuses to provide a place to mourn or to reflect. The language of memorialization at work here withholds that ability, sustaining in us a space that desires a conclusion that can never be realized. Rather than reconciling the injustice and horrific violence of Emmet Till’s murder, rather than delivering you catharsis, the artist lets you realize you never truly noticed him. Smith’s practice addresses sculpture’s ability to channel the power that comes from the naming of things, of words spoken in the correct order. In demonstrating the power of speaking the names of his subjects, Smith’s invisible monuments create a relational model of art and language that engages with conflict, resistance, and preservation while giving protection and honor to those who bore witness.

Contributor

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