

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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## Todd Gray upends expectations

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### Todd Gray's "Red Light" at Samson.

Photographer Todd Gray, in his assemblages at Samson, craftily breaks down iconography and expectations about Africans and African-Americans with canny juxtapositions. Gray was Michael Jackson's personal photographer in the 1980s; these works mix images of Jackson and his crew with photos shot more recently in Ghana, where the artist has a studio, and images from the Hubble Telescope.

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“Welcome to Planet Earth” has as a backdrop an old, majestic tree, shot from below. Gray shot it in Ghana, outside a former post in the slave trade. In the center, an image of Jackson: We see the pop star from behind, as another performer pushes him forward; a light glares between them like the sun. Jackson has his hands clasped behind him, and given the context, it’s as if they were shackled and he were being offered up for sale. Did Jackson pay a terrible price for his celebrity?

These assemblages telescope time and space, making potent connections. They also have formal poetry. “Akwidaa, Takoradi, Inglewood” sets an image of a Ghanaian woman in a brilliant red headscarf beside one of a Jackson brother in a cowboy hat. The cowboy hat hangs against a photo of graffiti in Ghana, which reads like a painting, and expresses anywhere-but-here aspirations of travel.

Gray’s use of starry Hubble images in some of these works adds another dimension. Everyday reality bumps against extraordinary fame, and the constellations link to both — they foster dreams, yet they are all of ours to gaze upon.