

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Michael Jackson Remains Invincible

A series of exhibits at MoAD look at Michael Jackson through the lens of "mental colonialism," and at the construction of narrative in Africa.

Jonathan Curiel Wed May 17th, 2017



Gang Star – Red (detail) (Courtesy of Todd Gray and Meliksetian Briggs)

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So many books have been written about Michael Jackson (more than 1,000), so many movies made (at least 250), and so many art exhibits produced (hundreds) that it seems almost impossible for anyone to create a unique take on the acclaimed “King of Pop.”

But along comes **Todd Gray** — Jackson’s first official photographer — and the **Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD)**, where Gray has analyzed Jackson from a perspective that’s utterly original and counterintuitive: the idea that Jackson lived his life under the shadow of “mental colonialism.” Jackson’s life, Gray argues, was loosely connected to the long history of physical colonialism that — like the other colonialism — has left a legacy that continues to throttle millions of people around the world.

“Todd Gray: My Life In the Bush With MJ and Iggy” goes far beyond Jackson’s life, but it’s the former lead singer of the Jackson Five — whose nose operations and changing appearance were the subject of worldwide speculation — who is the provocative lead-in to Gray’s art show. While Jackson’s skin coloration was the product of a condition called vitiligo, Gray says, the singer succumbed to his insecurities while becoming the world’s most commercially successful recording artist.

“Mental colonialism is what I really wanted to shine a light on, because I realized that Michael wasn’t pushing himself away from his Blackness,” Gray, who is African-American, tells SF Weekly. “He — like myself and many others in minority culture — have cultural pressures that induce inferiority complexes. And the cultural pressures basically create an equation that says the dominant culture is superior and that you as a minority culture

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are inferior.

“That’s been used in Western colonialism for hundreds and hundreds of years,” Gray adds. “And I was not aware of my own mental colonialism until I started researching Michael and mistakenly thinking that he was pushing away his Blackness and embracing whiteness or majority culture. Then I realized that he was actually physically — by his nose job and things of that nature — trying to make himself more beautiful. But who’s defining beauty? Majority culture is defining beauty. And in my research, I realized that this is how dominant culture maintains its dominance.”

Still, Gray’s art isn’t demagogic. In fact, nowhere in the MoAD exhibit will the words “mental colonialism” be found. Jackson himself rarely makes a full appearance at MoAD. Instead, Gray minimizes Jackson’s imagery: putting other images over Jackson’s face in some art pieces, and only hinting at Jackson in others. Gray submerged Jackson into a kind of teasing abstraction that upends visitors’ expectations.

One example: Gray’s surreal and arresting **Gang Star – Red**, which features a gang member from Jackson’s filming of his hit 1983 song “Beat It.” For the video, Jackson insisted on using actual members of Los Angeles’ Crips and Bloods gangs. For **Gang Star – Red**, Gray dug out of his archive an image of a gang member flashing a two-finger peace sign. But we don’t see the gang member’s face. Instead, Gray has framed it with a circular image of space taken by the Hubble Telescope. And within that frame is an image of a young Black man standing in a boat on a body of water that’s surrounded by large ferns — likely from Gray’s time in Ghana, where he’s had a photo studio for many years.

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“I was thinking about Rembrandt, and how Rembrandt painted the commoner,” Gray says by phone from South Africa, where he is doing a new photography project. “He was one of the first painters who painted common folks and not just the elite or aristocracy. I thought, ‘Who’s the most despised in our culture?’ And for us, it’s the gang member. That’s the lowest position on the social totem pole.”

Gray continues: “I wanted to recognize the gang-member’s humanity. I wanted to actually make a beautiful image of that person and use the cosmos in a way that talks about chance. We’re all an accumulation of stardust. We all come from the cosmos. Yet because the way society is structured, with power and systemic oppression, you have this gang culture ... that’s the product of capitalist culture. I wanted to make an homage to that. And something that brings light — not just darkness. And the gang members were extras on the “Beat It” video. I extracted them from my Jackson archive.”

That archive is packed with images from the 1980s, when Gray shadowed Jackson everywhere. In 2009, he published a book, **Michael Jackson: Before He Was King**, that highlighted the best of Gray’s collection. But Gray, who is based primarily in Los Angeles, has long since removed himself from the faultlines of pop culture, even though he was as close as anyone could get. Besides befriending Michael Jackson and his brothers, Gray became close to the singer **Iggy Pop** and to **Ray Manzarek** of the Doors. For a personal art project, he wore Manzarek’s clothes for a year after the keyboardist’s death in 2013 — a tribute to an artist he met in 1968 and who influenced Gray to become one

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himself.

Gray's sartorial homage became part of a 2016 exhibit at Los Angeles' Hammer Museum, "**Made in L.A. 2016**," but there were no photos of Gray there — only his correspondence with Manzarek's widow. As he has gotten older, Gray avoids giving art-goers work that can be reduced to simple messages. At MoAD, his art includes two pieces with taxidermied animals, both of which are from his "California Missions" project. They include mirrors and photos that suggest the art-goer is connected to the depopulation and massive cultural shifts that came with Europeans' arrival in the 18th century.

"You can create slippage through complexity — and that's what I'm doing through abstraction," Gray says, "so that the viewer has to work it out what they're looking at. What is their role in the relationship to these pictures? They have to insert themselves, their own history, their own psycho-emotional state, and come to their own conclusion."