

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ART AND CAKE

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Todd Gray at Meliksetian Briggs

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Todd Gray – Slipping into Darkness, All the Honey Gone. 2018, Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames with UV laminate_ courtesy of Meliksetian Briggs

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Todd Gray: Portraits

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By Shana Nys Dambrot

Todd Gray takes all the photographs in his mixed media works himself; he's been doing it since forever. Even if he didn't, if they were found or discovered in the public domain, his deft recombinations of landscapes, interiors, and portraits would still constitute affecting and innovative juxtapositions with a lot to say about the way the world is. His lyrically socio-political studies in counterpoints come from across an African diaspora stretching from Johannesburg to the Jackson 5, and from art history to systems theory. But the fact that every image was made by the artist, often decades apart from their compositional partners, adds an autobiographical focal point and a performative dimension to what is already a compelling visual discourse.

So when a black and white photograph of Michael Jackson c. 1980 is augmented and obscured by tondos depicting exotic foliage, with each element contained separately in a combination of custom and found frames, it can be read as both a fold in Gray's personal timeline, and a cognitively wavering duality of cultural experiences. Gray worked extensively as an editorial photographer in the music industry in the 1970s and '80s, including four years as Jackson's personal photographer. The extensive and intimate archive of these images forms one foundational source of Gray's self-montage technique. The other source is all the rest — personal travel, artist residencies, scholarly studies, political actions, private friendships, all of it.

When a mirrored lakeside landscape is rotated, its hourglass form is transformed into the trunk of a body; the figure's face is replaced by clasped hands. The image interventions, composites, and concealments operate somewhat like collage, except for the stained-glass soldering effect created by the individual frames. This sculptural gesture gives the images the heft and presence of physical objects, in the tradition of historical portraits and shaped canvases, even as the pictures themselves occupy a more surrealist territory. The clues and the hidden elements of each composition create the kind of mystery that prompts the viewer to lean closer, look longer, try to figure out what's behind there, that they can't see. In this way, the viewer is ultimately forced to make certain conclusions for themselves, to fill in gaps with a consciousness of their own participation in the story. This of course is something we all do anyway, whether we realize it or not. One of the strengths of Gray's practice is the elegance with which he highlights and scrutinizes this cognitive dynamic.

But the images are also beautiful. An overall palette of earth tones, grayscale, and natural greenery permeates throughout the landscapes as well as the interior design, lighting, and visible garments in the pictures, so that a golden atmosphere of warmth and life unifies the whole series. The alignments of bodies, faces, trees, furnishings and so on are all expertly finessed with notable visual wit. Again, this strategy of visual pleasure creates a sense of wholeness in each picture before the mysteries spark a deconstructive accounting of its components. The back and forth between the overall and the segments creates a narrative action in the viewer's brain which in turn mirrors how life is experienced and remembered — pieces of then and now rearranged in patterns and layers, meaning accrued in

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context and in the fullness of time, connections made all the more powerful by being allowed to suggest themselves. Gray accomplishes all of this and more with a balanced asymmetry and a practiced eye for detail that both elevates the ordinary and brings the spectacular to a human scale.

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