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“GLOBAL ART HISTORIES/ MULTIPLE MODERNITIES”

Posted on [February 10, 2011](#) by [William Gassaway](#)

The Centennial Session on “Global Art Histories/ Multiple Modernities” (Thursday, Feb. 10, 9:30am-Noon) is undoubtedly the liveliest panel I’ve seen thus far at the conference. CO-chaired by Leslie King-Hammond and Sarah Lewis, these panelists were as smitten with each others’ work as they were enamored of the topic – or should I say with the *idea* that this topic represented for them. While there were open disagreements among the panelists themselves as to the nature of their involvement with the global art scene, the entire event was punctuated by a lot of good-natured ribbing and poorly stifled guffaws.

As Dr. King-Hammond admitted in her opening remarks, she was not immediately jazzed to take the proscribed directive of hosting a “panel on diversity.” In fact, this former president of the CAA made it clear that she did not – and does not – wish to call this a diversity seminar (though it may still be listed that way) because, frankly, it’s a struggle which has become difficult to the point of exasperation in recent years. Using the Museum of Arts and Design’s current exhibition (“The Global Africa Project”) as a jump-off point, she and her fellow panelists invited those of us in the audience to make up our own minds as to the importance, depth or shallowness, and continued relevancy of such terms as “diversity” and “multiculturalism.” Furthermore, they compelled us to question the apparent triumphs and shortcomings of any “multiple, pluralistic, and cultural-comparative” mode of art production in today’s global modernity.

Sarah Lewis presented a phenomenal talk concerning 19th-century photographs of the so-called “Circassian beauties,” women of the Northern Caucasus who formed part of Barnum’s postbellum museum exhibition and were routinely paraded as exemplars of ideal white beauty. It was through images of these women that Lewis was able to illustrate many of the ways in which the permeability of race and color (as it was imagined in the 19th century) continues to plague racial identity and scholarship even today. Nonetheless, Lewis encourages us that a continued close reading of objects of art, no matter how troublesome they may be, eventually yields a greater understanding of ourselves and of people who may be located in faraway places and centuries past.

With her very first breath, Mina Cheon heartily disagreed with King-Hammond’s opening remarks by claiming, “Well, *I’m* not done fighting for diversity!” She then proceeded to layout a well-reasoned and sardonic rant against the stagnant institutionalization of art education in university located across the globe today. Citing her dual role as a Korean artist and an American educator, Cheon directly contradicted Lewis by asserting that works of art are resolutely *not* objects, but rather are more appropriately considered *relations* between geopolitical negotiations. Yet, much to her dismay, the full imperative and latent power of these relational objects are routinely stifled by the rote academicism that she it today charged to embody. The stagnation of the “art institution,” she claims, allows it to “gain more power the less it does.” Her thinly veiled diatribe against such institutions as that which employs her or the CAA itself was certainly a call to arms, but one whose form and trajectory remain indeterminate.

Continuing the trend, Lowery Sims began the next installment in the session by claiming outright, “I am a victim of diversity fatigue . . . [and] I just don’t give a damn anymore!” Such a statement which was met with uproarious laughter and characterized much of the panelists lighthearted rancor concerning the current state of things. At times humorous and witty, Sims’ talk meandered through the many motivations and themes of the “Global Africa Project” mentioned earlier. Claiming that the title was supposed to be “a prosaic placeholder for a sexier title,” she and the other organizers of the exhibit became too immersed in teasing out the fascinating themes of the exhibition to think anymore about it. Her dialectic of post-colonial thought versus our “Afro-Presumptive” tradition was fantastic, and her temporal/ pro-active approach to the curatorial practice was enlightening.

Finally Edward Sullivan’s talk began with even more scathing jests directed (again) toward the institutionalization of art and the often frustrating tedium associated with conferences such as this. But I think he reflected the sentiment of the entire audience when he said with a smile, “But this was fun! You all have redeemed my love for this kind of thing!” His thoughtful and at times affable run-down of his favorite artists working today was a real treat and remained refreshingly upbeat. Afterward, Paul Chaat Smith of the National Museum of the American Indian kept the spirit alive by joking about “the latest news on Indians” and how their situation may or may not resemble that of Egyptians today. He spoke of the idea and construction of the NMAI in 2004 and of how politics are often prohibitively expensive for Indians. Indians, he reasons, participate in art-making rather than policy construction. “Art is cheap and its part of our brand,” he quipped. “We’re like the supermodels of the ethnic world,” what with the wild get-ups and feathered headdresses with which Native Americans are so often portrayed in the media. All in all, it was a fantastic talk.

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One Response to “Global Art Histories/ Multiple Modernities”

1. [JasonM](#) says:[February 11, 2011 at 8:50 AM](#)

Great post — but if CAA were serious about diversity, they would investigate the perspectives of those scholars who are neither left-wing, Jewish, queer, nor female — that leaves about one percent of the current crop of up-and-coming young scholars.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/08/science/08tier.html>