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Huckleberry Finn

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Huckleberry Finn

By John Zarobell

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Amidst much recent discussion about the curator as author, Jens Hoffmann, curator of CCA's Wattis Institute, has found a fascinating new model for curatorial activity: reading. The last installment of his American novels trilogy proposes to investigate contemporary culture through the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (a daring selection), but the curatorial model he has introduced is significant beyond the complex thematic of this dense and provocative show. Before going into specifics about the exhibition, it is worth pausing to consider the conception. How does one read a novel so rich and historically contested? How does one organize an exhibition on the order of reading?

Hoffmann's exhibition is so engaging, it begs the question of how to generate meaning out of a text and out of the world. Staring at a writ of manumission for a woman named Dolly Bird, I had to wonder what the document, written in 1807, had to do with a novel published eighty years later, let alone with the realm of contemporary art that the curator normally traverses. The answer is not simple; neither is it so dazzlingly complex that a visitor must accept she will not get it, nod knowingly, and move on. Reading is not a simple matter of assimilating information, storing it, and closing the book. Rather, it is an encounter that draws forth associations, memories, questions of intent and, inevitably, interpretation. What one knows is largely determined by how one interprets, and *Huckleberry Finn* not only offers the curator's reading of the novel, but engages contemporary artists to posit theirs, finally soliciting the viewer to read the show. In this domain, Hoffmann has embraced the questioning of textual authority so implicit in Twain's text, and the result is a series of contingent propositions put forward and reconsidered from a distance.

To anyone familiar with Hoffmann's previous projects, it will come as no surprise that there are films to be found here, as well as pieces by a string of much-discussed artists who were commissioned to make new works for the exhibition. Hoffmann invited exactly the artists one would want to see take on this novel: Kara Walker, Yinka Shonibare, Hank Willis Thomas, and Edgar Arcenaux, among others. The contemporary works are paired with historical documents (both real and reproduced), photos and works of art from the civil rights era (Ruth Marion-Baruch and Emory Douglas, Betye Saar, David Hammons, and Andy Warhol), and an assortment of other historical artworks, as well as a remarkable map of the Mississippi made by James Lloyd in 1862 and a WPA-era documentary on the Mississippi valley (Pare

Lorentz, *The River* [1938]). The documentary aspect adds another dimension to our reading of the novel and to American history, though bona fide documents and reproductions are used interchangeably, causing the viewer to question what exactly she is faced with. It is notable that the focus here gives voice to the African American perspective,



Huckleberry Finn, installation view: Abraham Cruzvillegas, *Jim Beam*, 2010; wood, plastic containers, fishing rod, and bananas. Kara Walker, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 2010; paper silhouettes and watercolors on painted wall. Courtesy of the Wattis Institute, California College of the Arts.



Huckleberry Finn, installation view. Courtesy of the Wattis Institute, California College of the Arts.

but places it in a wider international context, with works by artists such as Abraham Cruzvillegas, Tim Lee, and Simon Fujiwara.

The exhibition is organized into two sections. According to the brochure text, in the downstairs gallery, the “installation attempts to make vivid Huck and Jim’s epic journey and some of the situations they

faced,” while upstairs “Jim’s turbulent quest for freedom” is the central concern. It seems that the major distinction between the two is that the particulars of the novel are more central to the partitioned downstairs galleries, while in the open space upstairs, the thematics of slavery and liberation are the driving concerns.

In both sections, charged groups of objects cause sparks to fly, and the task of interpretation pushes the visitor to new levels of experience. One of the downstairs galleries sets Hank Willis Thomas’ apotheosis of Uncle Ben, *After 61 Years of Service, I, Ben, Promoted* (2008), next to Betye Saar’s neo-folk shadow box, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972). Such ironic interventions by two generations of African American artists are juxtaposed against more earnest depictions of Southern life by Horace Pippin and Clementine Hunter and, farther down, *Slave Lynching* (1946), by Harlem Renaissance painter Claude Clark. The confusion that results from direct and indirect modes of address forces viewers to modulate their interpretive processes with each new work they encounter.

Upstairs, Shonibare’s kites in *Jim’s Escape* (2010) fly overhead. In front, Warhol’s *Birmingham Race Riot* (1964) is displayed beside a reproduction of a segregation-era sign that reads “BLACKS ONLY” and Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *The End* (1990), a stack of giveaway posters placed against the wall, each one containing a white space framed by a black border. Coming around this barrier, the visitor enters an open gallery with three sculptural installations in the center, a video playing on a television (Fujiwara), a couple kissing in a chair (from a separate but interlaced series by Tino Sehgal called *Guards Kissing* [2002]), and, on the opposite wall, a new work by Kara Walker that juxtaposes her signature black silhouettes with framed watercolors on a painted wall. Historical images line many of the walls. The visual effect is sumptuous and a bit overwhelming. At first, it feels a bit like a biennial gallery, confrontational and multitextual as they so often are. Yet the confusion is greater here because the works are not all contemporary and indeed they are not made with the same intent. As is the case with the manumission document, many of the objects in the room were not designed to be displayed in public. The visual cacophony of contemporary art is therefore compounded by a conceptual problem: how does one come to terms with authorial intent when the ideas are so numerous and the results are arranged, perhaps, but not controlled?

And this brings me back to the question of reading. If we think of Hoffmann as the author of this show, we must determine Hoffmann’s intent in order to evaluate whether he is successful. But if one imagines the curator as a reader, the opportunities of this exhibition are distinct indeed. These objects, and the artists who made them, are not part of some larger curatorial mastery of the exhibition domain. They are the fleeting thoughts, reminiscences, and associations that emerged from Hoffmann’s interaction with the novel. A text is no more than a starting point, and the result of reading is not a fixed object but an open-ended chain of reflections.

Huckleberry Finn is on view at the **Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art at CCA**, in San Francisco, through December 11, 2010.

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