

Constructing Return

Magdalyn Asimakis



There can, therefore, be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present.¹

Last year, Curtis Santiago began drawing with black pastel and charcoal. He marked paper with spare, deliberate lines and used red aerosol spray to render faces that seemed to radiate beyond their surfaces. The *Ancestor* drawings visually explore his spiritual and genealogical lineage with unknown predecessors. The fluid and gestural lines at once intimate a substantive presence and ambiguous movement. The movement of the body that Santiago represents, indeed, gestures to the life of the imagined ancestor. However, he also alludes to the instability that movement necessitates both theoretically and physically. As an artist whose past

¹ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in David Morley, ed. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 448.

involves varied instances of migration, concepts of movement and practices of locating are built into Santiago's process as modes of accessing the past that connects to his present. Works such as these drawings question and collapse temporal, genealogical and spatial distance as well as the ways we look at and narrativize the past.

In his seminal paper *New Ethnicities*, Stuart Hall argued that in order to understand and represent the black experience as the 'diaspora experience'—one that is made up of a myriad of ethnicities—one must utilize the technologies of the present to access the past; there is no simple return to one's ancestry without this intervention. The past is not static in that it is not detached from the unstable present. Our ancestral histories are not fixed for the same reason. Santiago, in the *Ancestor* drawings and in his practice at large, acknowledges this necessity through a visual language that is thread with references to past artistic practices. The work *Mother and Child*, for instance, cites Bantu culture through the imagined mother's hairstyle. However, Santiago does not exclusively locate the passing down of culture in the visual, as articulated through the mother feeding her child and the intent gaze between them. In the context of the exhibition *Constructing Return*, this work also illustrates the fluidity between the *Ancestor* series and Santiago's drawings of his mother, Monica, both as herself and as other characters. These works place

disparate yet related truths—both real and imagined—up against each other, refiguring the organizing principles of narrative structure.

That Santiago's drawings look to histories of bodily and cultural movement is complimented by his ongoing series of sculptural works in found jewelry boxes that index and facilitate physical movement. Under the artist's ideal circumstances, the boxes are meant to be closed and opened by the viewers' hands. This activating gesture is more catalytic than it is performative in its revealing and hiding of the contained narratives. It mirrors methods of resistance and retreat used to destabilize structures and for self-preservation; 'I must be heard' versus 'I will be silent.' The works further explore acts of cultural movement in the ways they are transported: with the artist as he travels and without external organizational support. The doubled physical mobilization of the works—both when stationary and travelling—points to a deliberate instability that the artist creates. This results in an avoidance of static art object status as well as an agility that undermines museum practices of art movement.

The dioramas in the exhibition *Constructing Return* explore spaces of cultural transition through scenes of heightened tension. In *Deluge VII*—part of Santiago's greater *Deluge* series—a ship full of migrants navigates tumultuous waters. By contrast, *1663 John Elliot's Algonquin (Native American Bible)* statically depicts a room

in an empty colonial Philadelphia home. Within themselves and amongst each other these works are charged by the politics of movement and power. The works' imaginary and multilayered historical references are imbued with the consequences of diaspora that Stuart Hall describes as a "process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut-and-mix'."² In drawing parallels between global conditions and distilling the tensions of in-betweenness—as in the case of *Mother Protecting Child*, a woman cradling her child while twisting her body to look back at an unknown scene—Santiago locates the diasporic experience in unfixed space. The poignancy of this volition, in addition, negates the colonial rationale of the 'other' as a homogenous, fixed and entirely knowable being.³

2 Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in David Morley, ed. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 447.

3 Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question," in Frances Barker, ed., *The Politics of Theory* (University of Essex: Department of Government, 1983), 23.

