

The Metamorphosis of Todd Gray - Julie Joyce

A little over four years ago, Todd Gray found himself at an impasse. Haunted as much by the indelible images of his own past series of works as he was by their equally indelible compartmentalization within the discourse of African American art, he felt the need to regroup, to take a new direction. Gray had been keeping in touch with a friend in Germany, so he decided to go to Europe--if not simply for a change of scenery, but also for inspiration. More specifically, he wanted to investigate one part of his identity that had until then been unexplored: his European culture. This was not the first time that he had felt the need for a major shift in his life or his work. In fact, in some respect, Gray is an artist who seems to be undergoing constant change. And some of the biggest changes in his life are indeed those that arise out of defiance: of something, someone, some system of power or belief. This time, the artist found himself going back to being a *photographer*: an occupation he held in the beginning of his professional life in the 1980s as Michael Jackson's official documentarian, and later a classification he had systemically rejected at Cal Arts under the guidance of Allan Sekula in the early 1990s.

Gray traveled to Germany five times from 2000-2001, bringing with him his camera, and using Dusseldorf as a hub to explore other parts of Western Europe. The initial results were works that became part of the *Europe* series. In contrast to the highly deliberate, "preconceived" method that he used up until this point, Gray began shooting for the first time through "free association." He also turned the camera *away* from himself and anything familiar and onto his surrounding landscape. What eventually came out of this new direction were exquisitely composed and richly colored urban scenes and architectural views.

It is through Gray's re-contextualization of these images, first by way of his particular and perceptive view and then via the juxta- or re-positioning of the final prints, that the *Europe* works are significant. *Pool*, for instance, turns a swimming pool and its reflection upside down, subverting reality while highlighting its relationship with illusion and suggesting parallel dichotomies such as heaven and hell. Illusion (heaven) literally comes out on top, but may not, in the end, be quite as inviting as hell. Most of what the viewer sees in *Red Head* is an expanse of green grass in a public park. The person that lies face down or rather passed out (from a drunken stupor?) on the lawn in the very center of the work is the focal point, his presence highlighted by the red jacket over his head much in the way that the tiny figures in Corot's expansive landscape paintings are elucidated with a dab of bright red paint. By tilting this horizontally formatted picture to the perpendicular, Gray conflates landscape with figuration. The repositioned, upright corpus incites not just a sense of uneasiness but an emotion more absurd and intense as it assumes the position of either a classic alien abduction or of the miraculous ascension of either Christ or the Virgin Mary.

The re-contextualizations that Gray applies to these pieces are manifestations of a conflict that has been central to his work since the beginning: the friction between the rational and emotional. And it is this very same conflict that characterizes the art historical genre that Gray's *Europe* works bring to mind. Gray was highly aware of the dominant schools of German photography throughout the 1990s. What he appears to have culled from them is an idiosyncratic combination of both the objective documentation characteristic of the Bechers or the School of Dusseldorf (particularly Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, and Thomas Struth, for example), with the

subjective and performance based works originating in the work of Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke (and found, for instance, in later in works by Katharina Sieverding and Anna and Bernhard Blume). What makes Gray's works particularly distinctive is the phenomenological filtering of these particular scenes and moments through his own practiced, acutely informed, and politically charged vision.

Many of the works in the Europe series posit humans or animals against the industrial or commercial landscape, emphasizing the dynamics inherent above as well as recalling the critique of commerce and corporate culture that the artist addressed in his previous bodies of work, such as *Support Systems* and *Goofy*. Perhaps the most obvious examples of these operative forces can be found in the diptychs, as in Gray's earliest and most capricious *Costa Rica/Spain*. While the two countries that these images suggest have significance as a pair--one was brutally colonized by the other--if we had to guess without knowing the title, these two scenes could have been taken from anywhere in the world. The contradictions resonate within each half of the diptych, manifest as the rural in disparity to the urban, or metropolitan, and eventually leading to the seeming preposterousness of living and functioning in a post-industrial society.

In *Berlin*, Gray juxtaposes an isolated view of an undistinguished industrial plant with an image of a woman. Eloquent visual likenesses in this unlikely pair include the flesh tone found in both the woman's neck and the boarded up windows of the structure, or the geometry of the plant with that of her shoulder straps. Yet the frozen anonymity of both subjects (the figure's head is turned, making identification impossible if not improbable), has the uncanny and lingering effect of making them both all the more human. Such is also the case with *Monk*, in which a large, darkly clad figure sits alone at a desk in a clean, brightly lit and ultramodern library. Portrayed from behind, the viewer can not determine who this person is or what it is that he is studying, yet scrutinized by society's standards of physical form and dress, this individual would appear homeless and possibly psychologically impaired. Here Gray has poignantly rediscovered the menacing *Goofy*,* as well as the ever present "other" that is historically embodied by the black male.

While issues related to Gray's identity thread subversively throughout the *Europe* works, they are driven to full force in the *Shaman* series. Conceived as self-portraits, these images are records of private, ritualistic performances that the artist carries out in his studio. Taking the simple act of shaving—a ritual of societal convention—into an emotionally and physically agitated realm, these works embody the mysticism and affinity with nature espoused by Joseph Beuys and the visceral expressionism of the Viennese Actionists, including Arnulf Rainer. (Both are artists whose work and influence Gray became familiar with during his travels during this time.) More importantly, the figures in these images impart the distinctive fury of Gray's earlier *Urban Myths*, as much slaves in bondage as they are animals in a cage. The thick coat of white foam provides an extreme contrast to the artist's skin in *Cologne*, the one photograph in this series that, through dramatic lighting and composition, is rendered more like a precious museum artifact or ethnographic specimen than a portrait: or, rather, an African mask. This lather mask nearly suffocates and blinds the artist, becoming a metaphor for white power. And yet other associations apply, such as imagining the reversal of the black face minstrel, or the history of Western viewpoints concerning non-Western or "primitive" art forms. These issues are provoked less subtly in *Fun Boar*, wherein

the artist's head is replaced with a taxidermied head of a boar, an effect as menacing as it is comical.

Identity and spirituality have always been crucial for Gray, and are often closely intertwined in his work. Whether subversively embedded in the challenges suggested by the *Goofy* series; viscerally depicted in the iconography and of *Urban Myths*, or documented subjectively through his recurrent projects regarding Michael Jackson, one may override the other, but they are inextricably linked. In terms of his background, Gray's firm rejection of the Catholicism with which he had been raised had less to do with typical teen rebellion than it did with deep contradictions that he saw among the faith itself and structures of power that administered it. While he has since adopted a multi-theistic approach to his own spirituality, occasionally celebrated in multifaceted events that he organizes and calls *Art Church*, the Catholic part of Gray's culture still lingers. And nowhere has it become so explicit than in the recent *California Missions* series.

It was through Gray's deepening investigations into the colonization and trade of indigenous peoples that lead him to this most recent project, the culmination of Gray's metamorphosis. Throughout his travels he sought out places that were central to Western Europe's involvement in the *expansion of Empire*. One such site was the dock in Amsterdam where, in 1620, Pilgrims first set sail on the *Speedwell* (to join up with the *Mayflower* in Southhampton) on their quest to establish a new colony in America, which Gray later included in *California Missions: Buffalo*. Gray's investigations inevitably lead him to the role of such endeavors on a more local level, specifically the controversial legacy of Junipero Serra and his task of establishing the Spanish missions in California (1769-1823). *Pig*, one of three of the *California Mission* works that Gray has realized thus far, features a taxidermed swine supporting a large photographic print of the altar at _____. Capturing the opulently appointed embellishments that are central to this church, the photograph slices through the animal's nose. Viewed from the front, the snout pokes through, immediately undermining any sense of reverentialness that this altar triggers. In a more subtle way, the piece, as do all of the works from this series, represents a metaphor for the way the American Indian, the African American, and others have been utilized or enslaved by systems of Western European, or white power. On the other side of the photograph, from behind, we see ourselves in the mirrored surface, and we are implicated into this history.