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Three Contemporaries, Each with a Different Way to View the Past

By Martha Schwendener

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The three artists in "Midnight's Daydream" were all artists in residence this past year at The Studio Museum in Harlem, but they take very different approaches to making art.

Titus Kaphar is the classicist: taking as his starting point European and American portrait paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries, he makes oil-on-canvas copies and reconfigures them in strategic ways. Wardell Milan II is the collagist: some of the show's best works are the digital C-prints he creates from family photos, art reproductions and images cut from magazines. And Demetrius Oliver is the Conceptualist: using spare photographs and staking his claim on signature materials like coal and tea kettles.

For "Conversation Between Paintings No. 3: Descent" Mr. Kaphar created a diptych by placing a copy of Sir John Baptiste de Medina's portrait "James Drummond, 2nd Titular Duke of Perth," of 1700, alongside a copy of Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson's portrait "Jean-Baptiste Belley," of 1797.

But his copies aren't exact. A figure has been cut out of the lower lefthand corner of the Medina painting, and Belley, a Senegalese-born former slave elected to the 1793 National Convention in Paris, has been inverted so that he now faces Drummond, a white man. The excised figure, a young black man looking up in admiration at Drummond, has been painted into the Belley portrait, changing the relationship between all the figures.

Another recognizable image used by Mr. Kaphar is Marie-Guillemine Benoist's "Portrait of a Negress" (1800) in the standard reclining-nude format. Pinned like a paper doll to the woman's breast is a copy of "Vice-Admiral George Darby," by George Romney, an arrangement that sets up a dialogue about art, sex, race and representation.

Mr. Kaphar has made two graceful sculptures by removing canvases from their stretchers, crumpling them and displaying the objects in plexiglass boxes. Titled "Aftermath: Artifact," each one features a painted portrait face that peers out from the folds of the canvas like a captive inside the vitrine.

Mr. Kaphar borrows the museum-mining techniques of Fred Wilson, and his classical-painting roots call to mind Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, but he is adept at juxtaposing his sources in collagelike fashion.

In the context of this show, Mr. Milan is the archetypal collagist. In “Day Dreaming: I dream of you beneath the flowers, for a couple of hours. Such a beautiful day,” an orgy of images — wrestlers, boxers, smiling relatives, stock cars, Giovanni da Bologna’s “Rape of the Sabines” — is crammed into a backyard setting. Nestled into the composition is a self-portrait of Mr. Milan, eyes closed, day-dreaming the dream of the artwork.

His series of collages titled “Battle Royale” consists of cuts and rearrangements made to black-and-white photographs of boxers like Jimmy Slade, Floyd Patterson, Ike Williams and Sugar Ray Robinson. The family and sports photos and his explorations of black male sexuality echo the work of artists like Lyle Ashton Harris and Glenn Ligon — who wrote the essay introducing Mr. Milan’s work in the show’s catalog — as well as Paul Pfeiffer’s videos in which sports figures are isolated from their surroundings.

Mr. Milan’s photographed collages include a wealth of images and a pile-up of references, everything from the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. to Rogier van der Weyden’s “Deposition.” But his graphite and charcoal drawings, which recall classical nude battle scenes and are titled after the Tennessee Williams short story “Desire and the Black Masseur,” are comparably one-dimensional.

Mr. Oliver is best known as a maker of spare photographs that accomplish much with very little, as with his photograph “Till” (2003-5), in which he covered his head with chocolate frosting to commemorate the 1955 Mississippi slaying of Emmett Till, a black teenager who was said to have whistled at a white woman.

Here Mr. Oliver uses photography and sculpture to extend his participation in a kind of trickster Conceptualism in the mold of Duchamp and, more pointedly, David Hammons. (A photograph of the show’s three young artists shows them standing under a version of Mr. Hammons’s red, black and green “African-American Flag,” and Mr. Oliver is turned toward the flag, as if saluting it.)

Two works by Mr. Oliver that seem to be direct nods to Mr. Hammons are “Midnight,” a blue blazer decorated with small white Christmas lights, and “Mimic,” a tea kettle outfitted with a hidden soundtrack of a human whistle.

Mr. Oliver is also increasingly exploring in the vein of artists like Joseph Beuys by staking a claim on signature materials. For Beuys those materials included fat, felt and sleds, recalling aspects of his rescue in World War II. For Mr. Oliver, bacon, coal and tea kettles are totemic (although their significance to him is not as clearly identified).

In the 44 photographs that make up “Almanac,” Mr. Oliver’s studio is reflected in the convex surface of a tea kettle. In every photograph a few objects sit in the foreground: light bulbs, a gas lantern, strips of bacon draped over the handles of a hammer and mallet or wrapped around

Mr. Oliver's finger. Coal makes its appearance in "Orbiter," a slide projected against the wall in which a piece of coal encircled by a hand creates a kind of eerie black hole.

In the catalog, Christine Y. Kim, the Studio Museum's associate curator and the show's organizer, links the works of Mr. Kaphar, Mr. Milan and Mr. Oliver by describing their daydream quality, that "tacit state of reflection" that comes on at midnight, "the witching hour." That could be one poetic similarity, if a bit nebulous.