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Hervé Télémaque

CENTRE POMPIDOU



Hervé Télémaque, *Fonds d'actualité, n°1* (Substantive Issues, no. 1), 2002, acrylic on canvas, 9' 8" x 12' 3".

With more than seventy works borrowed primarily from French public collections, Hervé Télémaque's recent retrospective reaffirmed the significant institutional support the Haitian-born artist has received in his adoptive country. Télémaque, who arrived in Paris via New York in 1961, has produced a body of work—paintings, sculptures, collages, drawings, and assemblages—that is as aesthetically diverse as it is thematically consistent. Chronologically tracing the development of Télémaque's unique lexicon—a blend of island motifs, pop-culture iconography, and art-historical references—the exhibition (which travels to the Musée Cantini in Marseille in June) describes postcolonial prejudice and alienation.

Four large paintings made in New York in 1959 and 1960 opened the exhibition in Paris. Clearly influenced by Abstract Expressionism, Télémaque's early works are distinguished by his inclusion of text and three-dimensional objects. The overtly political *Toussaint Louverture à New York*, 1960, is a gestural semiabstract portrait of the eighteenth-century general, whose rebel army ended slavery in Haiti. Evoking Louverture, gallant in a red military coat and bicorn hat, in the context of 1960s New York, Télémaque links the Haitian Revolution with the American civil rights movement.

Télémaque's paintings confront a lingering colonialist legacy. In *Vénus Hottentot*, 1962–63, several sketchy, barely figural nudes in pink, green, brown, and black float against a white background. The title is the sobriquet of Saartjie Baartman, a woman from what is now South Africa, whose protruding buttocks made her a star of nineteenth-century European freak shows; Télémaque saw a cast of her body in Paris's ethnographic Musée de l'Homme. The multimedia triptych *My Darling Clementine*, 1963, is titled after the 1946 John Ford western. In this early example of what would soon be labeled Narrative Figuration, Télémaque paints himself as a cartoon cowboy surrounded by examples of racist pop culture, including collaged newspaper advertisements for hair straightener, and a figurine with dark skin, enormous red lips, and a banana (part of an ad campaign for Banania, a chocolate drink still popular in France).

Having steadily integrated three-dimensional objects into his paintings, Télémaque turned his focus to sculpture in 1968. His "*Sculptures maigres*," 1968–69, suggest dismally dysfunctional means of transport. Bent, twisted, and otherwise crippled objects resembling sails, oars, and canes suggest captivity and exile. A play on the French term for African art, "*art nègre*," the series' title (which literally translates to "lean sculptures") underscores its political subtext. Returning to painting in the 1970s, Télémaque made overt references to twentieth-century artists, including Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte. *Suite à Magritte. Les vacances de Hegel, n°4*, 1971, inspired by a 1958 painting of a glass of

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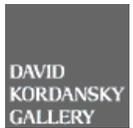
water balanced on an umbrella, recasts this imagery as pictograms on a cardboard box signifying “fragile” and “keep dry.”

Works from the 1980s and '90s show the artist again shifting materials and methods—to collage and assemblage—but not his message. *Mère-Afrique*, 1982, juxtaposes a photograph of a black nanny and a white child on a South African beach next to a sign that reads WHITE PERSONS ONLY in English and Afrikaans with paintings and sketches based on a 1920s caricature of Josephine Baker. Placed between the two images, a leather whip ties both to violence and slavery.

In the exhibition catalogue, Télémaque suggests that he might have titled the show “*Affranchi éduqué*” (Freed Educated). Certainly in keeping with the artist’s ongoing criticism of contemporary French politics—a painting from 2002, *Fonds d’actualité, n°1* (Substantive Issues, no. 1), describes the African reaction to the reelection of President Jacques Chirac over National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen using “happy Negro”-style caricatures—the allusion to slavery and colonialism found in this alternative title would have aptly summed up Télémaque’s provocative career.

—*Mara Hoberman*

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