



Rico Gatson, *History Lessons*, 2004, still from a color video, 10 minutes 12 seconds.

RICO GATSON

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Rico Gatson's work to date has consisted primarily of large-scale videos that explore racial stereotyping in Hollywood film. Here, however, his investigations took the form of multimedia installations that touch on similar issues but additionally confront the current media barrage of war imagery and the system of secrecy and fear that is now internationally pervasive.

History Lessons, 2004, was projected on four walls and shown on four monitors encased in a freestanding wooden structure at the center of the gallery's first room. The video is divided into four episodes, each with a different tempo. The first is based on footage from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Black-and-white images, toned in green, of battle-ready soldiers on horseback are multiplied by a kaleidoscope effect and accompanied by a sound track that evokes galloping hooves. In the second segment, made up of scratched, grainy images, Gatson investigates the depiction of black people in movies from the '30s and '40s. The actors are caricatures, their eyes protruding cartoonishly, their only function as objects of ridicule. The third segment illustrates the lyrics to Bob Dylan's ballad "Only a Pawn in Their Game" (1963), which deals with murdered black civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Faces of political figures of the time, beer-drinking good old boys, toy soldiers, bullets, graves, police dogs, and the words NEGRO and HATE enter and exit from the sides of the frame like cutouts in a toy theater. Where Dylan's lyrics attest to protest and civic indignation, Gatson chooses to comment on barbarity in low-key fashion, with a graphic straightforwardness that accentuates the vulgar face of white America.

In the final segment, Gatson uses footage of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles, which followed the arrest of Marquette Frye, a twenty-one-year-old black man who was apprehended by the police on suspicion of drunk driving. The riots lasted six days, leaving thirty-four

people dead. Gatson's editing generates a rapid-fire sequence of images—police officers, fires, weapons, people fleeing—and abrupt shifts in sound. Paradoxically, these images, in saturated blacks and tinted in brilliant colors, are rendered oddly palatable by their pop styling. The four parts of *History Lessons* are stylistically disconnected from one another. Each has its own graphic character and an assortment of formal references that range from pioneering Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov's experimental movies to Warhol's silk screens. The connecting thread is the narrative, through which Gatson addresses man's mistreatment of man and the abuse of political power.

In the second installation, which is titled *Clandestine*, 2004, and comprises a sculpture and seven paintings, Gatson investigates the signs and symbols of the Ku Klux Klan. *Separatist Celebration*, 2004, is a white plywood structure that looks like a scaled-down house turned inside out, its core filled with red lightbulbs that allude to the violence that may lurk behind a facade of normalcy. The paintings are, for the most part, white on white, with a grid of small dots reminiscent of Morse code or Braille, suggesting a metaphor for indecipherability. Gatson has borrowed Minimalist devices—the shaped panel, the all-over white surface—to indicate the Klan's chameleonic strategy. Images—a skull and bones, a distorted American flag, crosses and circles—emerge gradually from the monochromes, referring to the covert symbolism of the Klan. In *Masters of the Universe* #2, 2004, for example, four squares are arranged into the shape of an arrowhead. The circles inscribed in each panel create a complex and elusive visual matrix. Gatson works with precision, exploring the power of symbols as elements of collective imagination and bringing to light their potential for manipulation. While in the video the racial issue is obvious, the paintings see Gatson take a more oblique approach to the subject in order to observe it from a broader formal and cultural perspective.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.