



Rico Gatson, *Two Heads in a Box*, 1994, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Rico Gatson, *Two Heads in a Box* (video still), 1994, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



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Rico Gatson, *Picket Cage* (detail), 1999/2011, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Rico Gatson, *Picket Cage* (video still), 1999/2011, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

## Rico Gatson

### BEAUTY AND RAGE

by Elisabeth Kley

At the opening of "Three Trips Around the Block," a scorching 15-year survey of work by Rico Gatson at Exit Art, people were lining up to stick their heads through the bottom of a box hanging from the ceiling. Titled *Two Heads in a Box* (1994), this confrontational video installation is the show's earliest work. Imprisoned behind three bars inside its black interior is a movie that features Gatson's dark face illuminated by fiery red light and adorned with a white clown nose, a painted white beard and a huge white paper bowtie. Inverting Al Jolson's racist early-20th-century blackface performances, Gatson repeatedly intones Jolson's trademark song, *Let Me Sing and I'm Happy*, until he is ready to drop.

The exhibition is the first since the much-lamented death of Exit Art co-founder and director at Exit Art Jeanette Ingberman from complications of leukemia this summer. "Jeanette and Papo Colo approached me about the show almost exactly a year before her passing," Gatson recalls, "I first met them when they saw my work in 1992 at Sauce and their enthusiasm was my first real New York art world affirmation. I'm honored to have been a part of Jeanette's great passion for artists and art."

Born in 1966 in Augusta, Ga., Gatson grew up in California and graduated with an MFA from Yale in 1991. He's been showing with the legendary Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (which represents Leon Golub, Joseph Beuys, Hannah Wilke and Eleanor Antin, among other artists) since 2000. His work was included in "Freestyle," the influential 2001 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem that introduced the notion of post-black art -- "redefining complex notions of blackness," as curator Thelma Golden put it. (A conversation between Golden and Gatson is scheduled for Exit Art on Nov. 3, 2011.)

*Picket Cage* (1999-2011), another viewer-constricting installation, is a claustrophobic enclosure created by a tall white wooden fence. Inside is a video featuring a digitally simplified figure wearing a blood-spattered white Ku Klux Klan outfit that soon bursts into flame. As it intensifies, the fire becomes more realistic, accompanied by an ominous crackling soundtrack. The dark skin and eyes flashing underneath the cone hat lead one to suspect that the person burning is African-American. In fact, Gatson himself is performing the Klansman's immolation, a tragic paradox suggesting that racist violence destroys both perpetrators and victims.

Fire has continued to be a constant motif (it was the title of Gatson's first solo show at Feldman) but it's since become an interestingly frozen, almost manufactured formal conflagration, like an artificial inferno that's impervious to change. Hot reds and oranges are often frozen into stripes reminiscent of African textiles, geometric minimalism, and the bars of a cell, perhaps providing a bit of protective distance from overwhelming fury.

A technique opposing differing colors and textures obliquely echoes the more



Rico Gatson, *Nape of the Neck, Small of the Back*, 2006, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem, New York



Rico Gatson, *Untitled (L.A. Riots #1)*, 2011, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Rico Gatson, *The Group*, 2011, Rico Gatson, *Picket Cage (detail)*, 1999/2011, installed in "Three Trips around the Block" at Exit Art, courtesy Kevin M. Davis and Erin M. Teixeira

overt conflicts expressed in Gatson's starkly graphic paintings. In *Nape of the Neck, Small of the Back* (2006), for example, a male silhouette is constructed of darkly glowing wallpaper-like stripes of color that completely flatten the vulnerable body the title infers. Pierced with a constellation of scars, the figure's back faces the viewer, exposing a presumed history of slave-era abuse while masking his identity. Scars and background are painted with the same opaque metallic gold, as if the striped figure is completely insubstantial and may only consist of an imprisoning cage.

Playing an impeccably shimmering surface against a wrenching image, Gatson explains, "I'm interested in seducing the viewer and then hitting them on the way out, allowing a delayed response to powerfully charged content."

An equally meticulous trio of 2011 paintings carries the metaphors of flatness and fire, heavy opacity and atmospheric conflagration into symbolic representations of the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles that took place a year before Gatson was born -- the crucible that forged the Black Panthers. Smooth moody clouds of red and purple acrylic are set against areas of pitted black that can represent both charred ruined buildings and defiant human silhouettes raising their fists against the sky.

Conversely, in *The Group* (2011), which hangs on the opposite wall, the outline of a group of people with Afro hairstyles has been carved out of a heavy black sky. Hot vermillion bodies are speckled at the edges with purple, as if the riot's outer flames have been channeled into inner anger.

"Seeing a survey exhibition is like walking into the artist's brain," the artist Derrick Adams noted at the opening. "Rico's concepts have been steadily consistent and visually compelling." The breadth of work spread out over Exit Art's large space includes three video installations, five sculptures, nine drawings with photo collage, 12 C-prints, a couple of inkjet prints and 25 acrylic paintings, many with glitter and a few incorporating plexiglass and light bulbs.

Artists Kamrooz Aram, Esperanza Cortes, Lucy Hogg and Mike Ballou, critics Jerry Saltz and Blake Gopnik, and dealer Ronald Feldman were among those admiring the work.

"I try to represent a symbolic liberation of spirits in conflict, providing a way to view tragedy and pain as a process that often is only resolved through time," Gatson once explained while discussing one of 16 other videos that will be seen in a program on Oct. 14, 2011. His stunning amalgamations of beauty and rage can be seen until Nov. 23, 2011.