

**New York Museums**

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**The Trips Around the Block Thelma Golden in Conversation with Rico Gatson at Exit Art**

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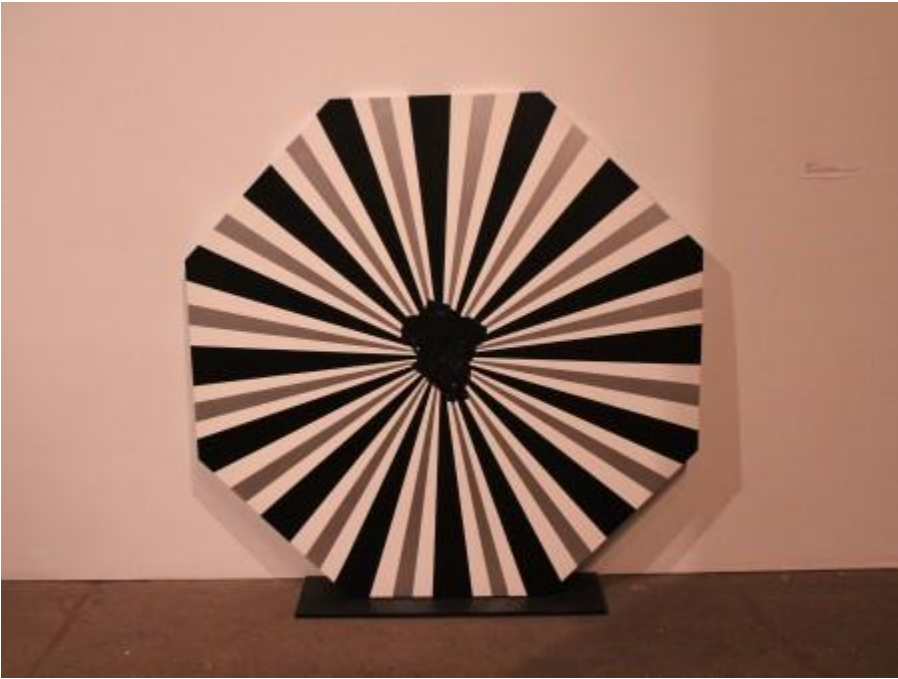
November 18, 2011



Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and artist, Rico Gatson at Exit Art. Photo: Kyla McMillan



**Rico Gatson**  
*Nape of the Neck, Small of the Back*, 2006 Museum Purchase 07.11.16.



**Rico Gatson**  
*Nigeria Power*, 2009  
Courtesy the artist



**Rico Gatson**  
*The Group*, 2011  
Courtesy the artist



The audience awaits the arrival of Thelma Golden and Rico Gatson in the intimate Exit Art theater. Photo: Kyla McMillan

Rico Gatson sees the potential for art in everything: he allows his everyday experiences to inspire his work. Recently at Exit Art, Gatson and Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, treated an audience to an engaging conversation about Gatson, his artwork, and his influences. *Three Trips Around the Block*, now on view at Exit Art, is a survey of 15 years of Gatson's work.

Gatson and Golden began their conversation by reflecting on their shared history and their appreciation for each other. Gatson, an artist in the iconic *Freestyle* (2001) exhibition at the Studio Museum, credited Golden and the exhibition itself for providing him with a "seminal moment as an artist." Golden quickly responded, stating the Gatson was a key figure in instigating *Freestyle*. His work for the exhibition, *Jungle, Jungle* (2001), is a short video that Gatson produced on his laptop shortly after moving to New York City. After displaying a clip from the video, he joked with the audience, assuring us that the video looked much more technically advanced in 2001, when it was first shown.

At moments the conversation seemed a bit like a sketch comedy show. Gatson would make a quirky remark, or begin to go off subject, but Thelma Golden knew just how to reel him back in, ensuring that Gatson provided a deep analysis of who he is as an artist. There is a comfortable rapport between the two, which was a pleasure for everyone in the audience to witness. One thing is for sure: Golden and Gatson have a mutual appreciation for each other, and a bond that made for an enlightening program.

From the exhibition alone it is obvious to the viewer that Gatson cannot be pigeon-holed. While explaining his works he reiterated time and time again that he is not simply a painter or a video artist, but like many artists of his generation, he moves through his career with fluidity, allowing himself to explore a wide array of media. Gatson began the program with a presentation that covered video, paintings (although he does not see himself as a painter), drawings, and sculptures. Golden then began her conversation with Gatson and asked, "When did you know you were an artist?" Gatson replied by saying that he had no choice, but to be an artist. He credited his mom for his interest in art, and mentioned that, to this day, she still has the first drawing he ever gave her— a gorilla.

I was fascinated listening to Gatson explain his work because he often was unable to pinpoint instances of inspiration or reasons for using specific media. Instead, he described his work, and his process of creating art as a spiritual exploration. I asked Gatson to explain why he used geometry to tell stories, in his works like *Nape of Neck, Small of the Back* (2006) and *Nigeria Power* (2009). He laughed and simply replied "I'm still trying to figure that out." He then further explained that he just loves stripes. He pointed to a vent and said that even its lines were interesting to him. Gatson then concluded by saying that he thinks it is dangerous to fight what he is drawn to innately.

Throughout the conversation Golden frequently questioned how Gatson's identity affects his artwork. He said, "When I start talking about this stuff I get self-conscious that it sounds cheesy. But it's all in me—the Christian, the African. How can it not be?" He also referenced his education and recalled that even as a student he knew he did not want to be confined. Gatson believes that in producing a diverse body of work, he is giving himself a license to create and live freely.

He described his work as a constant negotiation of ideas.

Golden ended the conversation by asking Gatson what informs his work today. Gatson is working to “breathe new life into stuff that gets buried in history.” He referenced a recent work, *The Group* (2011), which depicts key figures from the Black Panther Party, made with spray paint, and glitter. When an audience member later asked Gatson about the role that texture plays in his work, he simply replied, “I like glitter.”

All jokes aside, Gatson's body of work exemplifies his courage to tell stories about his own layered and complex identity.