

**RICO GATSON *Three Trips Around the Block****by Charles Schultz*

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Rico Gatson's retrospective at Exit Art, *Three Trips Around the Block*, ran the gamut of artistic expression. A survey spanning the last 15 years of the artist's career (he's 45), the work in the exhibition was by turns viscerally provocative and conceptually detached; it was unsettling at times, contemplative at others, alternately coded in contemporary iconography and resolutely abstract. Taking it all in—painting, video, an installation, drawings, a wall-bound mixed media work involving light bulbs and wainscoting, and set of mystical-minimalist sculptures titled *Magic Sticks*—was like spending time in an incredibly diverse neighborhood where it turns out everyone is family.

The impetus for the exhibition set Gatson up as an artist to measure career progress against. Third in an ongoing series at Exit Art called SOLO, the show aims (we are told in the press release) to give under-recognized mid-career artists enhanced public visibility. This is admirable, surely, but in the last decade Gatson has put on three solo exhibitions in Ronald Feldman's gallery; he's participated in group shows, both domestic and abroad, at numerous upstanding museums and universities; and he's been critically noted in many major newspapers and magazines (including the *Rail*). This raises a few interesting questions: What exactly does "recognition" mean now, who is in charge of doling it out, and what have they missed if they've overlooked Gatson?

To fail to see the timely poignancy of Gatson's work amounts to the same willful blindness that allows for all manners of misguidedness. We live in an age of enhanced globalized connectivity, boundless pluralism, and obstreperous political activism. It's an age where questions of identity are asked daily—who am I, and do I stand with these guys or those guys, and why? Piece by piece, Gatson's work addresses the challenge of dealing with these issues; collectively it embodies them.

His most bone-rattling and tone-setting work is "Two Heads in a Box" (1994), in which one head is yours and the other is the artist's. He's behind bars, close up on a video monitor, face painted white like a clown, eyes bulging, exhausting himself with song. The box blocks out all peripheral vision, upsetting one's sense of balance and inducing a claustrophobic state. Like a bad scene in history, it's an experience most—I presume—would be glad to move on from. "Two Heads" serves as a potent prelude to "Picket Cage" (1999), an installation wherein the visage of a Klansman is slowly consumed by fire (on a video monitor, again) in a human-sized cell made of white picket fencing. Both works activate a metaphor of ideological incarceration, and though these pieces—like many others in the show—center on racial intolerance as a theme, they point to a broader existential opportunity, one of self-liberation.

Gatson's sphere of influence gravitates towards mold-breakers. His paintings, heavy with sooty, non-sparkling glitter, commemorate the Black Panthers, the L.A. Riots, Basquiat, Sam Cooke, and the Nation of Nigeria. They are inherently political and, like Basquiat's painterly citations of Muhammad Ali, Charlie Parker, and Joe Louis, set up a kind of personal pantheon of heroes. Gatson's sculptural work rounds out this predictable group. All the neatly cut right-angle joints of his "Magic Sticks" (2009) call to mind Donald Judd's rigid designs and passion for variation on a geometric theme. Gatson's general aesthetic is, furthermore, one of measured precision that reads as the near opposite of intuition or spontaneity. You could check the straightness of an arrow against the artist's pinstripes and the sharpness of a razor against the lines of his silhouettes, both hallmarks of a painting technique he has refined in the last decade and a half.

I've read that the most damning thing that can happen to an artist is recognition, that an artist's growth can be, in fact, stunted by it. Recognition tends to be understood as the equivalent of success, which is too frequently tallied in market statistics and institutional accolades, as if the rewards of artistic enterprise were only in the hands of those who don't make art. It's sad when an artist's work becomes rote as a consequence of other people's praise and adoration. Thankfully this hasn't happened to Gatson; hopefully it never will.