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Rico Gatson Remixes Racially Charged Symbols

by [Deirdre Hering](#), October 31, 2011



(Rico Gatson, "Nigeria Power" (2009); Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.)

[Rico Gatson's](#) mid-career retrospective at [Exit Art](#) wrestles beautifully with issues of racial identity and intolerance. The canvases in [Three Trips Around the Block](#) (through November 23) ripple with color and texture along the wall—Gatson's subtly pebbled surfaces, vivid stripes, and finely ground glitters stand in bright contrast to the neat, stark sculptures gathered in the center of the gallery floor. Pleasing to the eye as they are, a bleak subtext quickly reveals itself in nearly all of his works—think a Christian cross that doubles as a pillory, or the stars and bars of the Confederate flag incised on a canvas painted over with

stripes reminiscent of African textiles.

Gatson has a true talent for seamlessly combining innocuous materials with powerful and polarizing symbols. With "Approximation of the Ku Klux Klan Symbol" (2006), Gatson re-imagines a burning cross with household items. His version doesn't smolder on a front lawn, but is instead surrounded by ordinary light bulbs and mounted on drab wood paneling—the same sort you'd find lining the walls of a basement rec room. Similarly, "Picket Cage" (1999/2011) depicts a truly chilling video image of a Klan member and a roaring fire. The video is installed within a tall cage built from white picket fencing (as the title notes), the end result an unsettling subversion of what once represented the American Dream. As infamous as they are commonplace, Gatson's objects serve as a grim reminder that racial intolerance lives, and is learned, in some of the most familiar places.