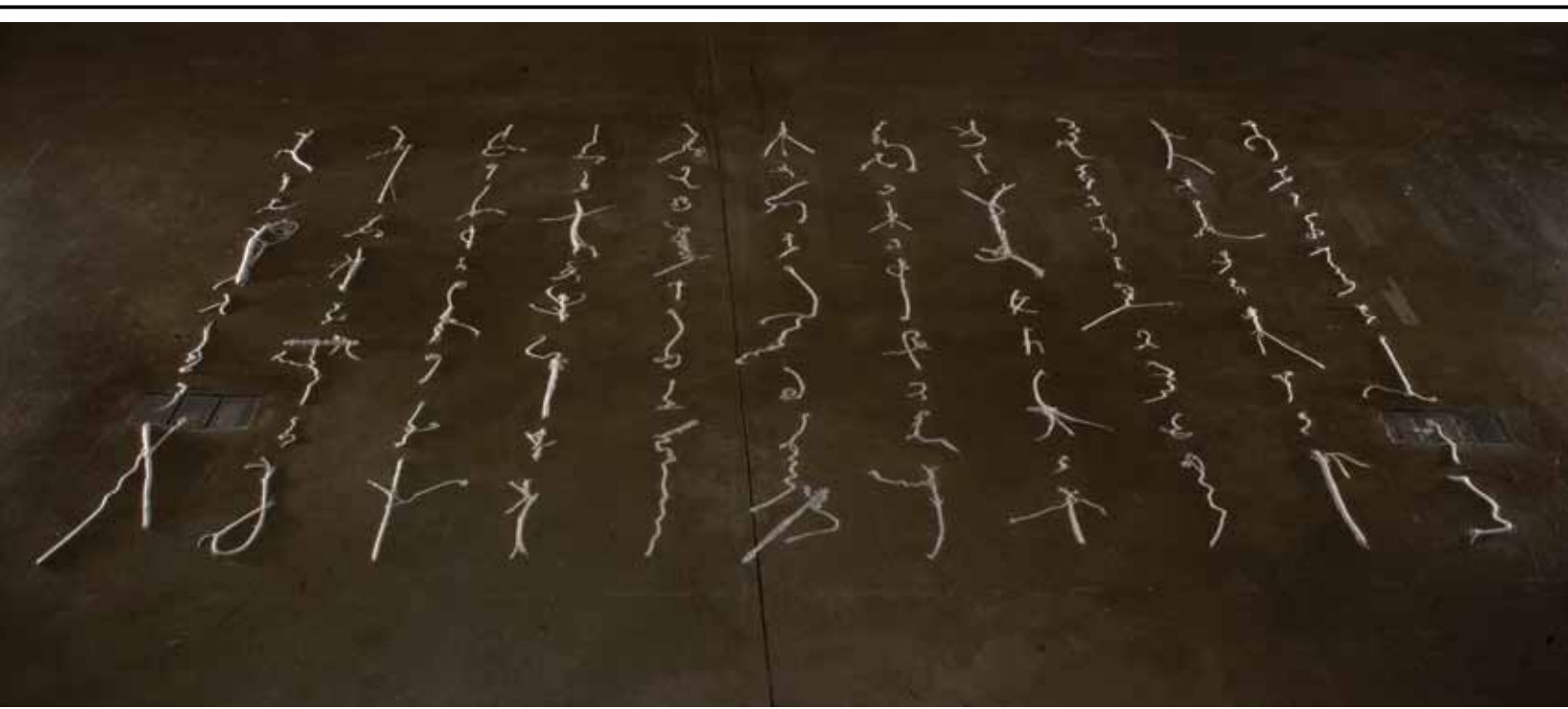


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NEW WAYS OF SEEING: BEYOND CULTURE

CLAUDIA ALVAREZ, AFRUZ AMIGHI, RINA BANERJEE, CHRISTIAN RUIZ BERMAN,
SANFORD BIGGERS, LEONARDO DREW, CUI FEI, RASHAWN GRIFFIN, RACHEL ELIZA
GRIFFITHS, WENDA GU, GINNY HUO, TAMIKO KAWATA, IVÁN NAVARRO & COURTNEY
SMITH, KAMBUI OLUJIMI, CECILIA PAREDES, SOO SUNNY PARK, YINKA SHONIBARE,
NARI WARD, AND ISHMAEL RANDALL WEEKS

Curated by Jan Garden Castro and Eileen Jeng

May 10 – July 12, 2015

Opening reception: Sunday, May 10, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

New *Ways of Seeing: Beyond Culture* features works by emerging and seasoned artists of African/African American, Asian/Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, and Middle Eastern heritages who are changing and expanding the vocabulary and agendas of the art world by injecting ideas from their world cultures and experiences. These proactive artists utilize materials and imagery in innovative ways that address themes including race, gender, ritual, craft, and language. Their materials often challenge existing associations and subvert expectations. They break down barriers to create new mythologies. Their works conflate the local and global, past and present, fact and fiction. These artists are “transcending the limits of individual cultures.”¹

The phrase “New Ways of Seeing” acknowledges that many past and present interpretations of culture are flawed, incomplete, or even false. As we know, scholars from ancient to Post-Colonial and Postmodern times had different views and agendas, often excluding women. In another direction, cultures borrow from, adapt, and change each other in myriad ways. For example, **Yinka Shonibare’s** art illustrates how Dutch fabric imitations of African art play with notions of authenticity. Shonibare views most constructs of (African and other) cultures as inauthentic. From an anthropologist’s view, Edward T. Hall argues, “context, in one sense, is just one of the many ways of looking at things.”² For these artists, there are many contexts. As John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* notes “...the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe [...] the more imaginative the work, the more profoundly it allows us to share the artist’s experience of the visible.”³ We push beyond his notions as well.



Afruz Amighi *Crowns*, 2014



Sanford Biggers *Ghettobird Tunic (Baby)*, 2003

In **Sanford Biggers’** art, trees for lynching may become pianos making music or welcoming spring. At the Brooklyn Museum Biggers’ *Blossom*, 2007, features a player piano playing the artist’s original variation of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit”, a song that protested lynching. *Ghettobird Tunic (Baby)*, 2003, is Biggers’ wearable bird-boy invention. It is a metaphorical response to helicopters, nicknamed Ghettobirds, that hover above the Los Angeles (and perhaps other) minority neighborhoods photographing ‘suspects’ and looking for crime. *The Tunic* comes in three sizes—to disguise the identities of men, youth, and children from the stigmatizing photos of police air patrols. Biggers thus addresses and transforms signs of past persecutions of black males into powerful camouflaging objects. In *Cheshire*, 2008, Biggers uses a symbol familiar to Europeans as the wide grin of Alice in Wonderland’s Cheshire Cat or the half-moon to undercut American views of the Negro minstrel’s grin. His signifiers intermix diverse signs, cultures and histories to introduce viewers to new perspectives on established symbols and histories.

Nari Ward turns the same grin into *Sugar Hill Smiles*, 2014—commodities in cans that we can buy and sell. In one way, Ward’s intentionally commercial display mounts a public relations campaign to turn Harlem’s Sugar Hill neighborhood into a more desirable commodity. In another way, he makes fun of people who try to sell trumped up or worthless things (like the Emperor’s New Clothes). Biggers, Ward, and the other artists in the exhibition remind us that cultural markers are in constant flux and should not be considered permanent. At the same time, Biggers and Ward re-position negatively-loaded cultural symbols into positive ones to upend former racist associations. They proudly reclaim African, Caribbean, and African American achievements and values that have correspondences worldwide.



Tamiko Kawata *Vertical Wave*, 1988

Material transformations are integral to a number of artists’ works as they create their own stories and mythologies. Growing up in a secular family in Iran, **Afruz Amighi** acknowledges the role of rituals on her work; she uses religious imagery and architecture as a starting point. She employs hardware materials, such as steel, concrete, and plumber’s chain, and transforms them through a process of reduction, pushing the physical limits and, ultimately, creating negative spaces. According to Amighi, *Crowns*, 2014, references the Moorish rule in medieval Spain, when churches were transformed into mosques and then back to churches after the re-conquest. Standing two to three feet tall and casting tall shadows, the sculptures connote both symbols of royalty and power as well as fragile, mortal skeletons.

Tamiko Kawata incorporates indigenous and discarded materials that are often overlooked in our daily lives,



Leonardo Drew *Number 134D*, 2012

such as safety pins, to create works that are not only personal reflections but also examinations of the environment. After moving from Japan to the United States, Kawata used safety pins for a practical reason—to shorten clothes—and the pins have become a significant part of her oeuvre. Kawata subconsciously connects the two cultures, and *Vertical Wave*, 1988, references water, an important symbol in Japanese culture.

Even though the works are often based on his personal histories and experience, **Leonardo Drew** utilizes ordinary materials, such as wood and metal, so the viewer's own personal histories and experiences inform their interpretations of the work. The materials have been transformed through processes of decay, oxidation, and deliberate weathering. In *Number 134D*, 2012, the undulating roots and tree branches reach out to the viewer. The meticulously placed pieces of burnt wood in a grid most likely resemble that of the housing projects in which Drew grew up. Drew pushes the limits of the materials as Amighi does. For Drew, his work is about “birth, life, and regeneration.”⁴

In contrast to Drew's use of materials whose histories involve natural processes, **Rashawn Griffin** employs materials that are self-evidently of human manufacture—scraps of fabric, ribbon, toys, and magazines, among others. *Untitled*, 2012, depicts a dark figure in the corner with small cutouts of people and animals and colorful thumbtacks. Griffin chooses objects that have significance for him, but evoke different memories for others. As Catherine Lord has noted, “Every object is both less and more than it seems. Every object has a history, elsewhere.”⁵

In *Untitled (from Mourners, series)*, 2010, **Kambui Olujimi** also creates his own mythologies, conflating past and present, local and global, while subverting



Claudia Alvarez *Niña con Zapatos*, 2013



Kambui Olujimi *Untitled (from Mourners, series)*, 2010

the expectation of traditional portraiture, especially in photography. These unique photographs are abstracted portraits from the *Wayward North* project, 2010. Using a customized developer, Olujimi selectively processes portions of the image and builds up the multiple layers. Identities are obscured, and the portraits become melancholic and morose.

Iván Navarro and **Courtney Smith's** *Street Lamp (Yellow Bench)*, 2012, looks like a comfortable park bench except that it is made of light. The color yellow presents an ambiguous message—it could represent the sun or,

in street light language, a warning sign before red. For the homeless, benches may be a place of comfort or danger. *Street Lamp* is also, literally, an electric chair. When Navarro grew up in Chile, Pinochet controlled the electric grid to control the populace.

Cecilia Paredes' *Shawl*, 2009, and *Collar*, 2010, use indigenous materials from Peru to fashion metaphors for protective clothing. *Shawl* is composed of the chrysalis shells of butterflies. According to the artist, peasants discard the shell after they eat the membrane inside. Paredes has sewn these symbols of birth into a protective covering. For *Collar*, she fashions porcupine quills collected in Peru's Amazon jungle into a collar that could shield its wearer.

Yinka Shonibare's *Black Gold Toy Painting 6*, 2006, breaks all traditional “rules” of painting. The work can be hung from any direction, so there is no privileged point of view. On the 2 ¼-inch side of the painting, model soldiers and US war planes pose atop Dutch-manufacture fabric with African designs. The toys and fabric point to the ongoing legacy of colonialism and military intervention in Africa. This side panel with action figures gives the painting a sculptural dimension. Thick black brushstrokes on the main surface defy all notions about brushstrokes. The sole variation from black, a border of gold hook-like forms, imitates the fabric design. Shonibare wryly intermixes painting, sculpture, and decoration to take deadly aim at the legacy of colonialism in the world.



Iván Navarro & Courtney Smith *Street Lamp (Yellow Bench)*, 2012



Rachel Eliza Griffiths *Black Unicorn Study: A Possible Lyric, 2015*

Many different cultures influence **Christian Ruiz Berman's** work, which incorporates his personal histories of migration, his Mexican-American background, Japanese art practices, as well as indigenous, European, and Tibetan Buddhist spiritual symbols. Berman examines many dichotomies, including past and present, exotic and commonplace, and authentic and artificial. He explores themes of identity, history, progress, technology, and architecture. In *Espejismos*, 2014, Berman creates alternating bands of yellow and blue feathers inside an exquisite wood frame with floral details; a live plant in an ostrich egg with legs sits on the shelf. The frame was found inside the house of the artist's biological father, who has for a long time been hospitalized with mental illness. Berman describes this work as "a meditation on the ways that one can feel close to someone who is largely unknowable. It also speaks to what is broken and what is whole, especially in terms of our memory and our genetic lineage."⁶

The artists also examine languages—lost and new—in their works. **Claudia Alvarez's** *Niña con Zapatos*, 2013, focuses on children as a metaphor for vulnerability. The naked child has a pink pacifier, a pink gun, and blue shoes. Alvarez uses scale to make her seem small, vulnerable. The child's gaze suggests trouble (the gaze reveals the violence and issues of war relevant to today's world). Her eyes seem older than her years. The shoes are an important sign of ownership.

Cui Fei's *Tracing the Origin VIII*, 2010-present, rendered in sand, references the history of Chinese characters, which have been transformed and simplified over the passage of time. The origin of the symbols is no longer recognizable and, therefore, abstract. In various iterations, Cui began this series using tendrils of grape vines to form these calligraphic characters. This work is based on the silhouettes of the tendril images. Cui uses language to examine the relationship between humans and nature. In her sand works, the ephemeral materials are a reminder of one's mortality.

Ginny Huo's Korean background and family's experiences assimilating to an American life have greatly influenced her work. She found that her understanding of Korean culture has been primarily through her mother's cautionary stories, such as sleeping with an electric fan on in an enclosed space results in death from asphyxiation. These stories had the unintended effect of making her anxious and phobic, but also had the fortunate effect of providing inspiration for her sculptures. In *1,000 Phobias*, 2008, Huo asked 1,000 people to write down or draw what they fear the most. Their fears were then shredded

and converted into paper pulp. By physically transforming the fears, old phobias became fresh materials for new ideas. Perhaps by connecting the vulnerable stories in the reconstructive process, we find ways to assimilate.

Rachel Eliza Griffiths, in her triptych *Black Unicorn Study: A Possible Lyric*, 2015, and her video *Silent Syntax*, 2014-2015, engages the language and mythology of Audre Lorde's poem "The Black Unicorn." Griffiths' imagery speaks to the embodiment and complexity of black women's experiences in America. The triptych joins three parallel universes: a woman in a white slip with a unicorn head; a self portrait of the artist herself suspended in a stone landscape, the Sardis Reservoir; and a woman ironing a black afro, clad in a white slip and blond afro while wearing a lamb's mask that is bleeding. Beneath the three images Lorde's text is quoted: "the black unicorn was mistaken/for a shadow or symbol." For Lorde and Griffiths, there is a clear tension between black women's bodies and the politics of how language works to transcribe a lucid relationship between racial masking, sexual desire, the natural world, the



Christian Ruiz Berman *Espejismos, 2014*



Wenda Gu *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, Painting E-1, 1997-98*



Ginny Huo *1,000 Phobias, 2008*

cultural role of black women as animals and laborers, and the American imagination.

Rina Banerjee's goat-woman in her Lanvin dress illustrates an art assimilation with diverse cultural associations. The work

has a long narrative title: *She was now in western style dress covered in part of Empires' ruffle and red dress, had a foreign and peculiar race, a Ganesha who had lost her head, was thrown across sea until herself shipwrecked. A native of Bangladesh lost foot to root in Bidesh, followed her mother full stop on forehead, trapped tongue of horn and grew ram-like under stress*, 2012. The title suggests a cross-cultural experience with East Indian roots that have been somewhat 'covered up' but still stick out. The materials used have disparate associations: cowrie shells, rooster feather, gourds, acrylic horns, ceramic balls, plastic netting, amber glass vials, violet glass bulbs, false glass doe eyeballs, silk and synthetic Lanvin ruffled red dress. Banerjee's goat lady represents a cornucopian blend of cultures and the uneven results of assimilation. As David Pagel has noted, Banerjee's "hallucinatory sculptures... appear to be figures, both animal and human, still lifes or landscapes. The best ones shape shift, changing their nature as you move around them."⁷

Ishmael Randall Weeks and **Wenda Gu** each differently address how language, culture, and artistic expression forage through history to re-discover overlooked or missing voices and traditions. In *Trofeos (Cesar Vallejo) [Trophies for Cesar Vallejo]*, 2015, Weeks honors Vallejo's (1892-1938) poem "Heraldos Negros" [Black Heralds], which every child in his native Peru knows. Weeks notes, "The poem, casually attached to the wall, somehow reminds us of childhood chalkboards and repetition with an underlying questioning of the very notions of human progress manifest through the rubber boom to today's industrialized culture."⁸ Industrialization may stifle poetry like Vallejo's which advocates humanist ideas. Thomas Merton called Vallejo "the greatest universal poet since Dante."⁹

Wenda Gu goes even further back in history. *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, Painting E-1*, 1997-98 re-imagines a Chinese culture that combines free-form drawing with the two main forms of ancient Chinese art—landscape and calligraphy. The large central ink on rice paper design looks like a woman, yet women were not central figures in ancient Chinese art. Some lines have been created by moving the paper so that the ink bleeds and runs. This work is unorthodox on purpose—breaking down hierarchies in Chinese art and culture and creating imaginary "lost dynasties" where genders and genres flow together in one artwork.

By "Beyond Culture" in our title, we focus as well on the in-between. **Soo Sunny Park's** *Painted Space: Long Dress*, 2002, is a hybrid work—a sculpture/dress made of painting materials—



Rina Banerjee *She was now in western style dress covered in part of Empires' ruffle and red dress, had a foreign and peculiar race, a Ganesha who had lost her head, was thrown across sea until herself shipwrecked. A native of Bangladesh lost foot to root in Bidesh, followed her mother full stop on forehead, trapped tongue of horn and grew ram-like under stress*, 2012

paint and glue. It places its wearer inside the art. Park's art focuses on the liminal and the immaterial—in this case, space made visible. Park's Korean heritage merges ideas developed by artists including Lygia Clark (Brazil) and Vladimir Tatlin (Russia), whose focus was the "real object in real space."¹⁰ As Homi K. Bhabha notes: "Being in the 'beyond', then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to re-inscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now."¹¹

In *New Ways of Seeing: Beyond Culture*, beauty, craft, and aesthetics become the handmaidens of truth—to expose problems and histories that can be ugly, repressed, and hidden. The artists are consciously reshaping dilemmas into objects of contemplation. They—along with many other artists whose works could easily have fit into this exhibition—are "vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language."¹² Their works are inclusive, revelatory, and in search of common grounds and associations. The works trigger a conversation with viewers and with each other—to propose positive interventions from which we can gain courage and new ideas. ■

— Jan Garden Castro & Eileen Jeng
New York, NY, 2015

NOTES

1. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books), [1976] 1977, p. 2.
2. Hall also notes that anthropologists "agree on three characteristics of culture: it is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated—you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups." *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 113.
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, [1972] 1977), pp. 8, 10.
4. Blaffer Gallery Interview with Leonardo Drew, "blaffertv", May 28, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTIdriKxeIM>.
5. Catherine Lord, "Griffin, KS," 2012.
6. Christian Ruiz Berman, e-mail message, March 7, 2015.
7. David Pagel, "Rina Banerjee 'Disgust' at L.A. Louver," *Los Angeles Times*: May 14, 2014.
8. Ishmael Randall Weeks note to Castro on March 25, 2015.
9. "Wikipedia César Vallejo page last modified on 4 November 2014, at 14:18."
10. From Soo Sunny Park, *Narrative Account of Career*, pp. 1, September 9, 2012.
11. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 10.
12. This is Bhabha's way of describing Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul's characters. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

BIOGRAPHIES

Jan Garden Castro is author of *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne*, and *The Last Frontier*. In addition to seventeen cover stories in *Sculpture Magazine*, her essays have appeared in *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *American Book Review*, and many anthologies, periodicals, and artist monographs. She has curated traveling exhibitions for International Arts & Artists and the Jane V. Zimmerli Museum, lectured at institutions including The Saint Louis Art Museum, Storm King Art Center, the University of Hawaii, Tampa University, the Maryland Institute, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her awards/fellowships include two National Endowment for Humanities fellowships and the Camargo Foundation. See also www.jancastro.com.

Eileen Jeng is an independent curator and writer as well as the Operations Manager at RxArt in New York. She contributes to *Two Coats of Paint*, and her recent exhibitions include *From Within the Flesh of the World: Adam Frelin and Rena Leinberger* at Radiator Gallery and *Suddenly, There: Discovery of the Find* at Garis & Hahn, among others in New York. She was involved in various other projects, including *Out to See* at the South Street Seaport and *FLOAT* at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. Previously, she was the archivist at Sperone Westwater and the research assistant in the Department of Contemporary Art at The Art Institute of Chicago. She earned an MA in arts administration and policy from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA in art history and advertising from Syracuse University.

CHECKLIST

CLAUDIA ALVAREZ

NIÑA CON ZAPATOS, 2013
Ceramic
35 x 14 x 11 ½ inches
Courtesy the artist

AFRUZ AMIGHI

CROWNS, 2014
Steel, epoxy, spray-paint, concrete
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Nicelle
Beauchene Gallery

RINA BANERJEE

*SHE WAS NOW IN WESTERN
STYLE DRESS COVERED IN PART
OF EMPIRES' RUFFLE AND RED
DRESS, HAD A FOREIGN AND
PECULIAR RACE, A GANESHA
WHO HAD LOST HER HEAD, WAS
THROWN ACROSS SEA UNTIL
HERSELF SHIPWRECKED. A
NATIVE OF BANGLADESH LOST
FOOT TO ROOT IN BIDESH,
FOLLOWED HER MOTHER FULL
STOP ON FOREHEAD, TRAPPED
TONGUE OF HORN AND GREW
RAM-LIKE UNDER STRESS*, 2012
Cowrie shells, rooster feather,
gourds, acrylic horns, ceramic
balls, plastic netting, amber glass
vials, violet glass bulbs, false glass
doe eyeballs, silk and synthetic
Lanvin ruffled red dress
5 ½ x 7 feet
Courtesy the artist and Jacob
Lewis Gallery

CHRISTIAN RUIZ BERMAN

ESPEJISMOS, 2014
Macaw feathers, ostrich egg,
amethyst, crow legs, air plant,
frame
34 x 22 inches

LAGRIMAS CRIOLLAS, 2014
Mixed media on panel and
chair back
40 x 20 inches

Courtesy the artist

Cover: **Cui Fei**, *Tracing the Origin VIII*, 2010-present

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SANFORD BIGGERS

GHETTOBIRD TUNIC (BABY),
2003
Bubble jacket and various
bird feathers
21 x 21 x 7 inches

SHAKE, 2011
Two-channel video with
sound element
15:01 minutes

Courtesy the artist

CUI FEI

TRACING THE ORIGIN VIII,
2010-present
Sand drawings
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

LEONARDO DREW

NUMBER 134D, 2012
Wood, paint chips, acrylic and
graphite on paper in plexiglas box
37 ¾ x 37 ¾ x 13 inches
Courtesy the artist and Sikkema
Jenkins & Co.

RASHAWN GRIFFIN

UNTITLED, 2012
Mixed media on canvas
24 x 18 inches
Courtesy the artist

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

*BLACK UNICORN STUDY: A
POSSIBLE LYRIC*, 2015
Digital print
18 x 40 inches

SILENT SYNTAX, 2014-2015
Video
7 minutes

Courtesy the artist

WENDA GU

*MYTHOS OF LOST DYNASTIES,
PAINTING E-1*, 1997-98
Ink on rice paper
73 x 115 inches framed
Courtesy the artist

GINNY HUO

1,000 PHOBIAS, 2008
Paper
60 x 60 x 48 inches
Courtesy the artist

TAMIKO KAWATA

VERTICAL WAVE, 1988
Safety pins
120 x 24 x 8 inches
Courtesy the artist

IVÁN NAVARRO & COURTNEY SMITH

STREET LAMP (YELLOW BENCH),
2012
Neon, cement, metal and
electric energy
38 1/2 x 72 x 43 inches
Courtesy Iván Navarro, Courtney
Smith and Paul Kasmin Gallery

KAMBUI OLUJIMI

*UNTITLED (FROM MOURNERS,
SERIES)*, 2010
Silver gelatin print on fiber
paper, unique
14 x 11 inches

*UNTITLED (FROM MOURNERS,
SERIES)*, 2010
Silver gelatin print on fiber
paper, unique
14 x 11 inches

Courtesy the artist

CECILIA PAREDES

SHAWL, 2009
Found chrysalis sewn together
with silk thread
34 x 30 inches

COLLAR, 2010
Cotton and found porcupine quills
9 x 5 inches
Courtesy the artist

SOO SUNNY PARK

PAINTED SPACE: LONG DRESS,
2000
Oil and latex paint, contact
cement, plastic, thread and needle
51 x 13 x 6 inches
Courtesy the artist

YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE

BLACK GOLD TOY PAINTING 6,
2006
Acrylic paint on Dutch wax printed
cotton canvas
38 ½ x 41 inches
© The Artist/DACS, London/
Courtesy James Cohan Gallery,
New York and Shanghai

NARI WARD

SUGAR HILL SMILES, 2014
Tin cans, labels, mirrored stainless
steel disks, smiles and video
25 cans, each 2.25 x 3.25 inches
(diameter) edition of 2000
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann
Maupin, New York and Hong
Kong, Nari Ward "Sugar Hill
Smiles" for No Longer Empty's *If
You Build It*, 2014

ISHMAEL RANDALL WEEKS

TROFEOS (CESAR VALLEJO), 2015
Stolen letters from car tires
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist