

HAUNTINGS ON GLASS

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

CHARACTER RECOGNITION

CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AT WOODSTOCK, THROUGH JULY 26

THIS WINTER, AT THE WILLIAMS College Museum of Art exhibition *Beyond the Familiar*, I viewed a colotype of a man from Surinam who was a living human display in the 1883 Colonial Exhibition in Amsterdam. Part of a wider phenomenon, at the time, of the display of peoples seen as exotic by white Europeans—think of the lurid fascination with Sara Baartman, the Hottentot Venus—this photographic image both reproduced the man's objectification and bore witness to it. I thought about this image again when I viewed Myra Greene's haunting ambrotypes (made in 2006-7) at the Center for Photography at Woodstock. Her images self-consciously play with the ignoble history of ethnographic photography and anthropometry (the measurement of the human body, often ideologically allied with eugenics and criminal anthropology) in order to confront racial prejudice. Greene inserts herself as both subject and object of a fictional catalog, re-creating colonial era exhibition images using ambrotype, a challenging wet-plate photographic process that yields multifaceted, moodily dark images.

Ariel Shanberg, the Center's director, who curated *Character Recognition* along with program associate Megan Flaherty, said "The work emerges out of systems of archives—this is a false archive, if you will." The riveting 3 x 4 close-ups of her facial features are in a sense objects trouvés, like a disturbing cache unearthed from a fictional ethnographer's trove, but they ultimately emphasize revisionism through Greene's dramatic presence.

Pointing out that the final, startling images in the room

are of her eyes wide open, Shanberg explained, "she's choosing not to be a passive subject."

Grimaces highlighting Greene's teeth, profiles emphasizing her lips, and a flattened close-up of her nose in which only the corners of her eyes are visible frustrate a viewer's attempt to make a whole identity or narrative of the series (in addition, the images are gender-neutral). And, further toying with a viewer's expectations, Greene talks back to the oppression of the ethnographic catalog in a powerful way by becoming a subversive presence when she holds her tongue out or widens her eyes open.

By using the ambrotype—a 19th century process in which an image is made directly on black glass photosensitized with collodium—Greene engages the aesthetics of ethnographic display. We see that scientific objectivity can be the prurient, bigoted myopia of the cropped close-up. At the same time, her small plates have a tactile immediacy that undermines the pseudo-scientific detachment of anthropometry. Greene

evokes these contradictions through the intimacy and seriality of these images (qualities nicely enhanced by the curators' choice to group them by facial feature—ears with ears, eyes with eyes) and through their visual irregularities.

These plates achieve a striking multi-tonality of shades of black, white, and silvery grays that speak volumes about the complexity of race and the human body. The glass bears the traces of their creator's body: One can see Greene's thumbprint often in the lower right-hand corner of many images, where the artist held the plate during processing. The glass itself, too, is irregular, and chemical residues leave smoky forms and squiggles known as "ghosting"—an expression suggestive of the history that haunts these images. As Shanberg noted, "she reminds us that the surface of an image is slippery."

Her artist's statement asks, "What do people see when they look at me? Am I nothing but black? Is that skin tone enough to describe my nature and expectation in life? Do my strong teeth make me a strong worker?" To that we might add, to what extent does the technology of photography complicate these questions? For Greene, photography itself—with its reversals of light and dark, its positives and negatives—becomes a fertile site of investigation into issues of race (this series was initially inspired, Greene wrote, by the rhetoric surrounding Hurricane Katrina).

Greene has, in other projects, used a variety of techniques, from Polaroid transfers to digital production and mixed media in order to document subjects like *My White Friends* and *Pox* (photographs from when she had chicken pox). As with her series *Hairy Locketts* (from 2000), in *Character Recognition*, the Victorian era serves again as a fraught reference point. Of course, artists from Kara Walker to Renee Cox and Carla Williams have mined this territory, too, calling attention to stereotypes and bodily identities. Yet Greene's skill at an unusual process and the emotional intensity of these tightly cropped portraits earn her a space all her own. ■



This is my image: from Myra Greene's *Character Recognition*.