

GALERIE

Riding Celestial Chariots – On Mining Entangled Vernaculars

11.02.2015 – 04.04.2015

An Exhibition by Satch Hoyt

Curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung und Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

Curator of POW,
Galerie Wedding – Raum für
zeitgenössische Kunst,
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»This exhibition is dedicated to my son Isha Hoyt and
the Jamaican cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart
Hall who both passed away in 2014.«

That coarse raking sound, a familiar sound. Through multiplicity and frequency it becomes melodious. But as melodious as it might be, the sound brings with it those memories. Memories of an era. Of an age. A moment. Memories that bring along other sounds that accompany the aforementioned: moaning, screeching, hissing sounds of a kid fighting back. The kid is clutched between the thighs of it's mama, as it tries to resist by yowling and growling, to no avail. It's Sunday and it's time to go to church, or it might be any other day for that matter. All is done, but the last bit. That hair matter! It was already political before you could spell the word politics, let alone understand what it means. Your mama would wash your hair, oil it and then start the combing with any of the afro combs she would find around. It might have been the wooden, plastic or metal afro comb. They brought along varying nuances in the sound they created as the comb's teeth chopped their ways through your curly hair, but the pain was there. As vivid as it could be.

This is an element in the cosmos in which the audience finds itself in Satch Hoyt's exhibition **Riding Celestial Chariots: On Mining Entangled Vernaculars**, most especially if the viewer shares a similar experience and memory as the above mentioned. Along with other sounds, the comb and it's soundscape take centre stage in this exhibition. The afro comb, though important as beauty tool, embodies a 5500 years of history¹ of form and meaning in form. The afro comb has stood it's grounds as the waves of glories and follies passed by the African continent. The afro comb was one of those few objects that made their way to the new world on the middle passage, under unbelievably cruel and inhumane circumstances. Upon arrival in the new world the comb, like a few other objects, rituals and the body itself, became the link between the lost past, that benighted present and a bleak future. It was silenced for a long time, as Africans in the diaspora tried to situate themselves in the New World, as they toiled on the plantations or went through ordeals of hair-straightening schemes. It is this same comb that along with the archetypical black power fist became a symbol of resistance in the freedom movements of the 1960s and 70s. The afro comb speaks a language. It frames a political, cultural, religious and historical vernacular. It is this vernacular that Satch Hoyt explores in his installations, paintings, and sound pieces.

1 S-A. Ashton, »Ancient Egyptian Hair combs in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge«, in Under the Potter's Tree. D. Aston, B. Bader, C. Gallorini, P. Nicholson and S. Buckingham (eds.) Studies on Ancient Egypt presented to Janine Bourriau on the occasion of her 70th birthday. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 204 (Leuven 2011), 19-44.

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Riding Celestial Chariots: On Mining Entangled Vernaculars is the first exhibition in a yearlong series of exhibitions that deal with the epistemology of objects and many narratives that accompany these objects when they encounter or exist with or within other cultures. The afro comb, in all its colours, forms and significations, serves as a point of departure or a key to unlock the numerous narratives that accompanied and still are a companion to the African presence. The references Hoyt conjures are multifaceted.

A pivotal piece in the exhibition is **»Hair Combing Cycle #14«** - a communal grooming performance of fourteen women from Africa and the African Diaspora seated in a circle and combing their hair in a choreographed percussive performance. The overhead microphones record the combing, while Hoyt, seated at the centre of the circle, processes and mixes the sound, which is experienced from loud speakers placed in the gallery. In **»Tangled Migrations«** a series of paintings partly executed by a scarring of the canvas, Hoyt on the one hand points to the lacerations endured from the bull whip punishment doled out on the plantations, and on the other hand he alludes to the Biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the guidance of Moses through the Red Sea, or Prophet Elijah's ascendance to heaven by a by a chariot (2 Kings 2:11) after striking open river Jordan, as also sung in Wallis Willis' **»Swing Low, Sweet Chariot«**, to references to the forced displacement of Africans in the slave trade. The narrative of the afro comb continues with the installation **»Ice Pick«**, a fierce transparent and almost diamond-like 'black-fist' comb, which might allude to the economic resources and strength in black experience, but also at the same time might be a subtle accusation on how transparent the black movements have become. The same holds true for **»From Mau Mau to Bling Bling«**, an afro comb pimped with diamonds, which narrates the metamorphosis in the aesthetics, philosophies and politics of blackness - from the Mau Mau liberation movements and revolts in the 1950s and 60s in Kenya against the British colonial power, through the Black Power movements in the USA in the 1970s, to the contemporary emphasis on a material culture, on polished surfaces, on expensive jewellery, and on 'bling bling' amongst people of colour. A central piece in the articulation of Hoyt's narrative of the comb as epistemological object is the wall piece afro pick **»Pendant«** - at close look it is a constellation of crosses that portray a religious aspect on the discourse of the middle passage. That cross that was held together with the bible in the one hand, to shift attention from the gun in the other hand, as Christianity posed for economic, cultural and political subjugation. From afar, the piece looks like a huge necklace or just constellations of geometric forms.

A mnemonic composed of sound, music, and objects could be a rough bridge between the entangled vernaculars and the celestial spaces Satch Hoyt creates. In the central piece **»Celestial Vessel«**, Hoyt deploys red RCA Victor vinyl records to create a 16-foot long flying boat. Another chariot ready to shuttle a yonder. That **»Celestial Vessel«** that carried not only slaves to the New World during the Atlantic Middle Passage, but also carried their music, dance and rituals that later laid the foundation of almost all music genres in that New World - from New Orleans to Port-au-Prince, to Bahia. Asked about his inspiration towards the piece in an interview for The Chronicle, Satch Hoyt explains:

»The vessel seeks to investigate various pertinent issues such as displacement, rootlessness and abandonment, also acknowledging the fact that belief systems and music held elements of the culture intact. Part of my mission is to mine history and find materials that no one else has used in the contemporary art world. These RCA Victor Red Seal vinyls were only released for about four years. I discovered them at a New York flea market three or four years ago. The canoe is a symbol of the Middle Passage and the African diaspora. It was the first vessel of slavery. Traders used canoes to transport slaves down the rivers to the slave ships.«²

2 <http://www.dukechronicle.com/articles/2009/09/17/celestial-vessel-interview-satch-hoyt#>.
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But »Celestial Vessel« is also a signifier for the future, for futurism. Of a space beyond this space that could be a safer and fairer refuge. That space literally, sonically and aesthetically is portrayed by the likes of Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelic, or even JM Basquiat.

The exploratory journey in **Riding Celestial Chariots: On Mining Entangled Vernaculars** continues with »**He Loved Him Madly, Slave, The Back Beat** and **Sonic Snarewave**«. The latter is a 4,5m long wall installation that comprises of 1450 drum sticks insinuating a snare drum wave. Sound is made visible. Music made tangible.

Satch Hoyt is a Berlin-based British-Jamaican visual artist and musician who investigates the »being«, the becoming, the existence, the challenges of the African Diaspora experience through his artistic practice . Hoyt writes in his own words:

»I argue that this mnemonic network of sound is a primary element that has kept the transnational African Diaspora intact. Through research of African diaspora histories, mythologies and cosmologies I employ a plethora of materials such as boxing gloves, raw cotton, police batons, drum sticks, bull whips, burnt electric guitars, used 1970's tennis racquets, 45 rpm vinyl records and guitar plectrums, as well as drawings and paintings. These works are accompanied by a self composed sonic cartography to map out historical and fantastical Afro-futuristic Black Atlantic journeys – voyages from Slave Ship to Space Ship. Through research, narrative, imagination, myth and fantasy I persevere to contribute to the ongoing construction of a new all-inclusive Black cultural identity.«

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