

## Diaspora Art in the Creole City

When in 1996 Rosie Gordon-Wallace founded Diaspora Vibes Gallery, she named the sensibility of Miami blackness, its arts practices and its audiences. While the term obviously accommodates artists of African-descent, it is capacious enough to encompass a range of identities from Caribbean, African American, Latin American and the otherwise othered. Such an imagined community is repeatedly called into being in the kinds of shows mounted across the Miami's various visual arts institutions. For example, when in June of 2016, Richard Haden curates *Intersectionalities* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami featuring the work of South Florida artists, the exhibition's very title is an invitation to think across the various entangled vectors of oppression experienced by the city's inhabitants. And as such, the show invited museumgoers to think about intersectionality as emblematic of the Miami experience.

Where institutional leaders lay claim to Miami as a city comfortable with diversity, intersectionality is meant to do a kind of work that diversity cannot capture. Confronting difference even as we claim diversity, intersectionality pushes against binaries, forcing us to think in more complex ways. In fact, I want to suggest that intersectionality goes beyond diversity to think about deeper levels of engagement: how communities overlap and contest over resources; and, how in one body several identities intersect; Miami intersectionality teaches us that we have to undo our assumptions about what we think we see, or the conclusions we might draw simply from *the visual or sonic*. In Miami, whiteness is not simply Anglo. As a result, some of the most powerful embodiments of whiteness articulate that power in Spanish. In addition, some of the poorest embodiments of whiteness are four generations of white homesteads. In Miami,

Blackness is always framed as a question since it could easily be Caribbean, Latin American, African American, continental African or Bahamian; and in some cases, a mixture of all the above. In Miami, Cubaness has to be thought about generationally, at the very least. If intersectionality forces us not to elide intra- group difference, *then* in Miami, negotiating intra-group difference is an everyday way of life. Everyday interactions, and even discrimination, in Miami takes place using an intersectional grid. These are the stories and stereotypes that *this show* challenged us to confront as a way of activating change.

Museumgoers visit museums *to see* the visual art work produced by various artists. But in *Intersectionality*, the curator activated various senses. He asks us, what does intersectionality *feel like*? A walk through the exhibition space—without wall texts, makes the viewer both *see and feel* that intersectionality is difficult work: difficult to inhabit, difficult to navigate; difficult to process; difficult to digest. For a walker through this exhibition viewing is not passive consumption or instruction; instead, the exhibition requires museumgoers confronting the many art objects in a range of medium have to do their own critical thinking, critical association and disassociation and to grapple with feelings of wonder, pleasure, pain and doubt.

The foundational bricks of Rosa Naday Garmendia's installation, "Rituals of Commemoration," names Arthur McDuffie, the unarmed black male motorcyclist (who was a salesman and former Marine) who was beaten into a coma by white police officers for running a red light on December 17 1979. His consequent death leads to a trial against the four officers. The trial itself is moved from Miami to Tampa, where an all-white jury acquitted the officers sparking a three-day race riot in Miami on May 17, 1980 from which Liberty City has not yet recovered. With Trayvon Martin's death, Florida is in the contemporary national discourse about

violence at the hands of police officers of black youth, but here Rosa takes us back to longer history—a Miami history—of the black lives matter movement.

Similarly, political in its visual articulation, the mixed media installation, “Weight of Words” 2016 by Jamilah Sabur and Veronica Mills, disrupts our assumptions about where the stories of violence against women and girls persist. Overlaid against the back dropped words, “Damaged Commodity” these artists pull stories from news accounts over the last three years and hang them like clothes on a line: 1-Intimate partner violence, 2-Rape as weapon of war that follows Syria and South Sudan refugees in Jordan and Uganda, 3-femicide in Argentina and Guatemala, 4-rome, Italy, 5-campus rape of US campuses even the Christian Brigham Young University, 6-Sweden and domestic violence, 7-rape as human female cost of crossing the US border, 8-in New York city a tween kills herself from cyberbullying. Again, before the visibly popular #me too movement, these Miami artists wanted to connect these various types of sexual violations again women across the world; using intersectionality to debunk both stereotypes and sacred cows that would require silence and shame.

Gentrification has fundamentally shifted the very ground from which art making and viewing happens in Miami; nonetheless smaller operations remain committed to building audiences for diasporic arts. I want to close with two smaller institutions that engage audience building through intersectional practice. As of 2003, Diaspora Vibes has closed in gallery space in Miami’s Design District and has gone on to become an Arts incubator continuing its work through virtual presence and annual international cultural exchange (ICE). In the era of Trump, their ICE program gives new meaning to the ICE acronym that divides and hierarchies culture to instead building bridges of cultural understanding through artist practices. Griot Gallery in

Haitian Studies Center, a medical clinic in the heart of Little Haiti is another outlier. Run by Michael Butler a retired physician from Louisiana, the art is on display for workers and every day visitors to the site. In addition, every second Saturday of the month, Butler himself teaches a thematic session, where he showcases work from his extensive collection so that the audience can engage the original art works.

Intersectionality is the way of engaging art-institutional audiences in Miami. In its insistence that we always *inhabit and account for* multiple subject positions, *intersectionality is always an unfinished project*. It does not provide answers. Instead, it does provide us a critical lens from which to view and feel our way through pressing social problems.

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