

THE ARMORY SHOW 2021

WILLIAM VILLALONGO



MOTHER TONGUE

Here, William Villalongo defines anatomies through collaged images of geologic forms, meteorites, butterflies, drinking gourds, and African sculpture interspersed with leafy cut-outs. Combining images drawn from ecological and cultural histories, the artist emphasizes themes of deep time, navigation, beauty, and transformation. Drawing parallels to natural metamorphosis, Villalongo suggests an evolution of Black identity—a caterpillar emerges from its chrysalis to become a butterfly while rocks, compressed over millennia, transform to become crystals. By collapsing time and space through earthly and cosmic imagery, the artist calls attention to the fluctuating role of the Black figure. He studies and transmutes the Black image, underscoring liminality and transformation through his living motifs. The sensuous

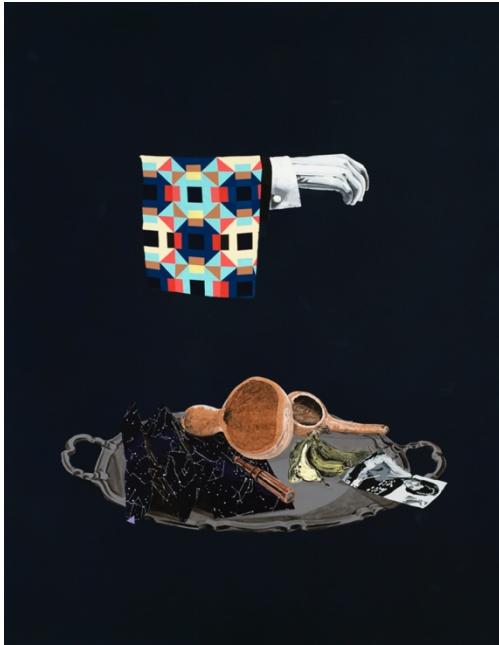
materiality and saturated color of the velvety black paper reinforces the experience and sensation of spirits rising from extreme darkness, confronting conditions of their visibility. The resulting scene interrogates the tentative space held by the Black body in contemporary society and throughout history and art, balancing loss and agency over the Black self-image.



KEEP YOUR HEAD TO THE SKY

The velvet-flocked gourds that populate *Keep Your Head to the Sky* appear alongside a variety of objects that carry symbolic weight in African American culture and history. Each object is linked to a network of 18k gold chains, not unlike charms on a bracelet. The velvet flocking acts to shift meaning from the literal to the metaphoric. The gourds in this work reference the Big Dipper constellation once used as a navigational device on the Underground Railroad. The minerals attached, Obsidian, quartz and Tourmaline, are believed to shield against negative energies, dissolving emotional blockages and ancient trauma. The cowry shells speak to Black labor on whose backs road the economy of the colonial Atlantic. Coral elements reference the artist's own Afro-Caribbean roots. The velvet coated resin hands that support the chains are casts taken from the hands of the artist and his wife. For Villalongo, love and family provide the strength to persevere and the will to find the Way. To quote the words of Earth, Wind and Fire...Keep Your Head to the Sky

Gold chains inhabit a place in African American popular culture as "bling" or "drip." Originally a means to hold on to monetary value, the practice of wearing gold chains became popularized within hip-hop culture during the late '70s and '80s and endures today in Black culture. For the artist growing up, gold chains had many levels of significance from expressions of power, style and cool to memories of adolescent courtship rituals exchanging chains as a visible sign of affection.



STILL LIFE WITH QUILT AND DRINKING GOURDS & STILL LIFE WITH AQUARIUM

Still Life with Quilt and Drinking Gourds and *Still Life with Aquarium* directly references European and Dutch still life painting from the colonial era, a genre known as “memento mori” that pointed metaphorically to human mortality in a rich display of colonial plunder. Usually thought of as benign grouping of objects, the artist sees in these paintings stories of colonialism, ill-gotten gains and Black labor. Often, the work incorporated images of Black “servant boys,” just visible outside the frame deployed to serve as symbol of the European subject’s wealth. Such paintings express the paradoxical visibility and invisibility of Black people within the European colonial world.

In *Still Life with Quilt and Drinking Gourds*, the artist explores how seemingly innocent objects can be used to tell a freighted story. The rich velvet ground enfolds histories and narratives within a space of blackness, unlinked from time and place. From a dimly lit background emerges a white-

gloved hand draped with a quilt in lieu of the traditional luteau. Below, a silver platter is littered with drinking gourds, a star map, nautical telescope, rotting bananas and a photograph of Nichelle Nichols as Lieutenant Uhura of the “Star Trek” television series.



The tableau features objects used to navigate by the stars and to way-find, conjuring images of Black migration and the Underground Railroad. The quilted waiter’s napkin suggests the patterned quilts used to signal safe houses along the Underground Railroad. It has been posited that specific messages were hidden in the geometry of these quilts. The pattern shown here was known as the “Lincoln platform,” developed in honor of President Lincoln’s inauguration. A portrait of Lieutenant Uhura from “Star Trek,” is featured in this painting alongside the gourds which symbolized the Big Dipper, a navigational device on the Underground Railroad. Nichelle Nichols’ character first appeared on the series in 1966, and was ground breaking in many ways, most notably for the first on-screen interracial kiss. For the artist, she represents the furthest reaches of the Black imagination. In the face of a world which to this day tries to extinguish Black lives, Uhura showed us a future with a Black woman in charge.

Still Life with Aquarium features an invisible white-gloved servant, presenting a silver domed dish of lobster and a fish bowl, presumably to his colonizer. An inverted African sculpture acts as décor for tropical fish, the lobster holds on for dear life. Were it not for the incongruity of these objects, little attention would be paid to either subject, white gloved, red clawed or otherwise. Further consideration rewards the careful viewer with an abundance of signs and symbols of the Black

Atlantic, representing notions of Black labor, the objects and lives lost, but also liberation and survival. *Still Life with Aquarium* serves to remind us not only of the fragility of human life but the fragility of human history, as it is told and reconsidered.



FEAST WITH NKISI

Feast with Nkisi is a painting about conflict, conquest, and memorial presented as feast. On a silver platter, symbols of colonial power are balanced by stolen objects of cultural significance. The nkisi nkondi figure, a source of spiritual and physical healing, is represented lying down. Its position symbolizes its diminished status as an object of conquest. The nkisi figure's healing power is further complicated here by the gun that acts as pillow. The sextant just behind the nkisi is a navigational device that dates back to the late 17th century. It is primarily used for celestial navigation, measuring the angle between an astronomical object and the horizon to measure latitude, altitude, or position on an aeronautical or nautical chart. The Dutch flowers and Olde English malt liquor reference colonial power. Olde English malt liquor was also the preferred drink of early 90's gangster rappers. The hanging shoes are a nod to the practice of tossing shoes over a power line in memorial. The cheese, carrots, and ducks refer to monetary gain, the latter

an appropriation from the Flemish painter Justus Sustermans' *Still Life with Two Wild Ducks Hung Up*, 1640. Garlic, peeled orange and prosciutto round out the feast.



FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY, STING LIKE A BEE

Float like a Butterfly, Sting like a Bee contrasts Western and African notions of male beauty, masculinity, and power. Here, Villalongo presents a visual collision within the figure incorporating images of Michelangelo's *David* alongside power figures from many African cultures. The Renaissance marble sculpture, set against the black velvet background, stands out in its stark whiteness. Each artist represents power in ways specific to their respective culture. Michelangelo's *David* relays the parable of David and Goliath, an example of heart and courage prevailing over physical strength. The "power figures," found in a number of African cultures, are thought to contain great spiritual and healing powers.

These interpretations of power, taken from both Western art history and the African diaspora, connect with the Muhammad Ali quote found in the title of Villalongo's work. Images of bees and butterflies join sculptural icons to form the body, while the head is demarcated by a boxing helmet. Three-dimensional drinking gourds, strung together with beads and flocked in black velvet and glitter, are clasped firm in hand. "Muhammad Ali's quote is also about strength and wisdom in life as much as it encapsulates his boxing strategy," says Villalongo. "For Black people, it works well as a life lesson. For me, it's also another instance where cycles of nature and pollination are used as metaphors for resilience and grace under pressure. I make these contrasts to remind the viewer that we are more the same than different."



THE MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION

This large-scale diptych takes its title from the 1975 Parliament album of the same name. The record is one of the first to explore George Clinton's P-Funk mythology, in which he envisions a celestial, Space Age-inspired realm of resiliency and enlightenment for African Americans. In the title track of the album, Clinton introduces himself as the Mothership connection, bringing forth an environment of funk and dance. Parliament's *Mothership Connection* has since become a cornerstone of Afrofuturism, an aesthetic and philosophy that marks the intersection of the African diaspora with technology.

Villalongo's *Mothership Connection* presents two images: at left, the silhouette of a slave ship; at right, a disembodied figure both emerging from and diving into the darkness. The celestial and earthly are bound together through the imagery of historical violence and its repercussions in the present. Referencing scholar Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*, the slave vessel recalls the tragic history of the Middle Passage for enslaved Africans and its mark—or the "wake" of these voyages—on the contemporary African diaspora. In particular, Villalongo highlights not just the systemic racism and trauma resulting from slavery but how this experience informs African-American cultural traditions, remembrance, and ancestry.