

Small, Constance Victory. "Masks as Muse: The Brooklyn Museum's Modern Disclosure of African Art." After Nyne. 31 May 2016.

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Masks as Muse: The Brooklyn Museum's Modern Discourse of African Art

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DISGUISE: Masks & Global African Art at the Brooklyn Museum is an endlessly expressive repertoire of video, sound, installation art, sculpture, and photography that explores the ever-evolving role of masks and masquerade within African and African Diaspora art. The astounding selection of multi-media works pivot on the aesthetics and rituals of historical African masquerade, and includes the work of 25 contemporary artists all of whom are either African, or of the African Diaspora. Among the meritorious talent is American born William Villalongo, a mixed media artist whose paper collage compositions juxtapose contemporary pop culture imagery with traditional African masks.

Villalongo's displayed works are largely inspired by the European modernists appropriation of African masks as muses within paintings; he in turn uses paper collage to create a trans-cultural narrative that simultaneously counters and reverses this appropriation. Such a thoughtful execution candidly punctuates the seductive prowess and exoticism of the female form, albeit with a cleverly unconventional rendering.

Muses (Artifact 1) 2015, is a striking composition in which nude European models gesture coquettish poses with faces covered by oversized African headdresses, serves as an audacious rendition to

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Picasso's *Demoiselle D'Avignon*. Within the context of the compositions and in consideration of European modernist paintings, one must ponder the identity of the artist's muse: is it the appropriated nudes, or the 19th century masks from Cabon?

In light of this prolific exhibition, After Nyne conversed with William Villalongo about his reverence of the female form, feminism in art, and his personal stance on cultural appropriations.

1. Among the most intriguing aspects of *Muses (Artifact 1) 2015*, is distinguishing the masks as muses, as they are juxtaposed with the curvaceous female forms, which are typically celebrated as muses. Is there a similitude between the masks, and the women that they veil?

In my work the muse is a type of masquerade to unearth other conversations. These are not fixed points. The pieces are collages, which for me is a place of proposition. The mask being worn in "Artifact 12, Jet" is an abstract painting from an auction catalog and the figure is a centerfold from a 1974 *Jet* magazine set next to a constellation. Its about levels of abstraction the muse is an abstraction, the mask is an abstraction and the vastness of the universe in relation to all this seems to give any of those things a closer proximity than may be readily apparent.

2. Is there a larger message that is concealed within the relationship between the masks and the models?

The masquerade is a place of fiction. The viewer's imagination is an important part of its activation.

3. Where do you perceive your work fits within the frame of feminist art?

I suppose that would be extremely presumptuous. I do think that feminist thought is necessary information for thinking through larger questions social equality.

4. How would you compare the audience response to the appropriation of European modernists painters (ie, Picasso's *Demoiselle D'Avignon*) of African masks, with your rendition, *Muses (Artifact 1) 2015*?

I didn't survey this, but I feel it is a similar image gesture, which feels different because the collages utilize recognizable sources. I would hope the viewer is thinking once again to the masquerade as a way to think through such historical gestures.

5. In which strata of society do you believe cultural appropriations of Afro-centric culture to be the most pervasive?

American popular culture is a cultural appropriation machine and of course Afro-centric culture plays a large part in American popular culture. It is ubiquitous.

6. How would you connect the *Muses* narrative with those of your other works?

The collage works I have on display in the *Disguise* exhibition are about my source material. Its about putting my hands on the actual material that I look at in order to develop images and narratives in my paintings. I make similar images in my paintings; however, the collage comes with the content of its source while in my paintings the source is push far from its point of origin. I wanted to look at it all at the same time.

7. Is there a specific memory or idea that inspired your exploration of the female form within the myth-like context that you consistently use?

My work is not about catharsis or biography. Very early on in my work I knew I wanted to investigate the mythic in relationship to blackness and along the way I have found many ways to think about that.

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Mostly, it has come through looking at other paintings and how subjects and images change over time. Men have entered the paintings recently as well. I don't see my work as closed circuit. I don't believe my work is "about" the "exploration of the female form" but that of a historical subject whose meaning has changed over time in relationship to the world around it perhaps more so than others.



8. Are there aspects of the feminist movement within art that have inspired the context of your compositions?

Well probably to many for the space allotted. I always think about the relationship between the early movements of Woman's Suffrage and Abolition which shows the difficult path to human freedoms in that the relating of one to the other was crucial stratagem in pushing both forward. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was an informative read at as a student and still is yet, I find it limiting that she didn't consider black screen actresses. What does that essay mean in relationship to Hattie McDaniel for example who is best known for the Mammy role in Gone With the Wind? However, it is a revelatory essay on what it means to see and to be seen and to see oneself being seen. Angela Davis gave a pretty amazing talk, Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the 21 Century in Chicago. I wasn't there unfortunately, but I've YouTube'd it 5 times now.

9. Your work punctuates the mystic power within the female form. Do you find this reverence to be a pervasive point of view within the dialogue of contemporary art?

I'm interested in the history of the female form in Painting and with that comes notions of enchantment, mysticism and exoticism. I'm thinking more about what those images say about how "otherness" is positioned and represented. There is more going on in the muses, nymphs and bathers paintings of old than the "mystery of feminine beauty" there is also a framework or set of terms being reinforced that are more about power in relationship to bodies. In other words there is not much difference between the 'male gaze' and the colonial gaze. As such these images often place the female form within a utopia or a domestic in which they seem to have little narrative agency. My work is part satire and part indulgence in the lyricism and problematic of narrative figure painting. The women in my paintings do things, mostly, building the world in which they exist. Mysticism as a general term speaks

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to profound possibilities of change in the face of whatever reality is perceived. For me this is guiding logic for making narrative work, rethinking master narratives and constructing images.

I don't know if I can speak to the pulse of contemporary art with regards to mysticism and the female form. It is definitely a rich subject that I see in the world beyond my studio. However, I don't think there is much reverence for anything in most contemporary art.

William Villalongo lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. His work is included in several noteworthy collections, including the Studio Museum In Harlem, The Whitney Museum of American Art & Princeton University Art Museum. His compositions have been reviewed in the Art In America, The New Yorker and the New York Times. Villalongo is currently represented by Susan Inglett Gallery, NY.

Constance Victory