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Art Against the Wall

By Deanna Sirlin

One wall is filled by a video in black and white, although to say black and white does not do it justice. The grey tones are so warm and rich, and the black tones are filled with depth of tonality. The sound is of tearing and crackling and bells and chimes, with a faint echo of birds and wildlife. There are drum sounds, cymbals, and drums played with a brush. A young black man, the artist, sits in a chair that is not quite in the center of an all-white space, including the floor and walls, as the

camera slowly moves in a circular, hypnotic motion. The man is nude from the waist up. His muscular arms and chest are revealed to us, and his arms are outstretched. He is wearing a strange black, skirt-like garment that goes from his waist to the floor, and a fedora on his head. It is the artist performing for the camera. The title of the work is *Inzilo*, which means widowhood and mourning in Zulu, and the artist is Mohau Modisakeng. He was born in 1986, in Soweto, Johannesburg. No only is this an extraordinary artwork, it is also the perfect way to begin meditating on *Art Against the Wall: An Artist Response to Civil Wars*, a group exhibition curated by Atlanta artist Radcliffe Bailey.

This is the first exhibition Bailey has curated. Recently, many artists are dipping their toes into the world of curation. Curating this exhibition is a brilliant move on Bailey's part in the game of chess that is the art world. It allows him to assemble and show his sources and passions. Bailey comes honestly to presenting these artworks and objects that reflect on the nature of civil war, the tearing apart, the sadness and mourning that so much of his own work has been about: the South and the civil rights movement, his history here in Atlanta, and other ruminations about civil war that he has articulated by making paintings and installations that have included slave ships painted in black silhouette and covered in glitter, sparkling on the surface of his works, ladders, old photos, and reclaimed wood. Bailey's own work is not in the exhibition, but everything that is refers to his work, experience, and knowledge. The result is much more interesting than those group shows curated by artists in order to include their own work.



Modisakeng's video, *Inzilo*, shows him tearing pieces of blackness off his own skin and releasing them into the air; these pieces of black dust become a kind of painful magic that the artist conjures up for us. What must it have been like for this young artist growing up in Soweto, historically a place of apartheid and uprising. By the time Modisakeng was in school, the regime had changed. However, the feelings of anger and sadness linger. Here in Atlanta, it has been 150 years since the Civil War, and less than that since the burgeoning of the Civil Rights Movement, but both of these past events hardly feel historical. Rather, they are parts of the place itself. I often think about Martin Luther King, Jr. when I drive down Boulevard and get to Sweet Auburn near the house where he grew up, still standing and open to those who wish to visit.

Refreshingly, Bailey has not just pondered the US War between the States, but also about the state of civil war both globally and personally. It is the personal part of this equation and the richness of Bailey's choices of both art and objects that make this exhibition so compelling for me. I have always felt that certain art and community objects have power and magic. I often have a physical reaction to works of art, but objects propose a different story. Here Bailey gives us painting, sculpture, photography and video, along with hats and musical instruments. A top hat sits in a vitrine. It is old and worn but very beautiful, an iconic symbol the Old South, of elegance and graciousness, but also of servants and coachmen. This hat has power, and Bailey knows it. It is part of his personal collection.

When I first saw Donald Locke's *Southern Mansions II* 1996, acrylic and collage on plywood, in this exhibition I must admit that I was surprised by the unexpected and wonderful kinship of Locke's paintings to Bailey's. Locke was a well respected and beloved artist here in Atlanta whom I claim as a dear friend. He died in 2010, and I am so happy that his presence is still felt by artists like Bailey. Locke was originally from Guyana, South America, and lived and worked in Edinburgh, Phoenix, and Atlanta. I can still hear the way he greeted everyone at art events in his lovely lilting voice. Locke's painting

has a black center, which he often used, overlaid with rectangles in a bright intense blue that move upward on a curve. Collaged elements of sculptural forms are scattered in a kind of loose grid that moves upward across and through the painting. There are splashes of yellow, red, and green that sit like fireworks on the deep dark black ground, which has a kinship to the black dust and color of Modisakeng's video. Bailey has curated the work in this exhibition with an eye toward setting up such relationships among works even when they are in different rooms, relationships that extend implicitly to Bailey's own work.



There are many other excellent and provocative works in this exhibition. The objects or images you are drawn to perhaps tell you the most about yourself. There is a hand-made folk art-like coffin made by PAA Joe, photographs of the Black Panthers and other civil rights era shots by Stephen Shames, a clay pot by George Washington Carver of peanut fame, and a painting by Bailey's fellow Southerner and Atlanta artist E.K. Huckaby. The exhibition prompts thought and wonder on many levels, and imparts new knowledge that resonates long after you've left the gallery.

Many exhibitions these days contain objects that give historical reference to ideas set out by the artist or curator, but this approach is particularly powerful here. Bailey has opened new territory by using this exhibition to contemplate the nature of his own art. But mostly, what he has mixed and remixed as artist /curator is just plain magic .

Deanna Sirlin

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www.deannasirlin.com

Deanna Sirlin is Editor-in-Chief of *The Art Section*. She is an artist based in Atlanta.

Art Against the Wall: An Artist Response to Civil War was on view at [Gallery 72](#), City of Atlanta Office of Cultural Affairs, from July 11 - August 22, 2014.

Photos, from top:

Mohau Modisakeng, *Inzilo*. Video Installation, 2013. © Mohau Modisakeng. (Photo courtesy the artist and Brundyn+ Cape Town)

Buffalo Soldier's Hat (Photo Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery)

Donald Locke, *Southern Mansions II*. Acrylic and collage on plywood, 1996. Courtesy of donaldlocke.com.

