



Zoë Charlton

Zoë Charlton's drawings, videos and installations read like prized works of figurative fiction fashioned from histories and herstories lived but not fully articulated or understood. Interested in how aspects of our painful African Diaspora heritage have been made more palatable in cartoons, sitcoms and even stand-up comedy, she recovers stories rarely told in the process of going from pathos to tragicomic humor. Exposing what's fallen in between our fault lines with alternating satire and subtlety, Charlton teases stories out of difficult histories not with a hammer, but with a needle and thread.

Charlton's drawings and installations playfully reveal the dark underside of seemingly innocuous pastimes. In her collaborative installation with Rick Delaney, *There Goes the Neighborhood* (2004), she transforms fictionally inspired white dwarf-like men—Dutch garden gnomes—into an ornamental reference to minstrelsy. Having painted them seven different shades, from brown to black, she places the creatures within a white picket fence, as they might appear on a suburban lawn. Their gleaming ceramic veneers are a sharp contrast to the cracked and peeling paint of the fence that surrounds them. That this symbol of social boundaries and class division is so weathered signals that the signpost of seeming domestic tranquility is a corroded façade. In another work of socioeconomic critique, her drawing *Wish You Were Here, Betty and John* (2000) references the ubiquitous postcard format of a provocative tropical scene that might inspire envy, yet the white man and woman blithely enjoying water-skiing are doing so off the back of a 17th-century slave ship. Here Charlton highlights a commonly elided fact—even our leisure pursuits and resorts have in large part been made possible by the pernicious history of slavery as a foundational economic institution. In her drawing, *Gnomes* (2002), miniature 17th-century slave ships rest on the backs of bent-over black women dressed in nothing but birthday hats and their birthday suits, playing with the fantastical creatures at their feet. In this visual metaphor both for the way that we carry our past with us and how it gives birth to our identity, the benign pastime of toy model shipbuilding loses its innocence, as do toy soldier games in her drawing, *Onward Marching* (2002), in which miniature armed men exiting encampments take aim at a giant-sized black woman, again dressed in only a birthday hat and socks.

Charlton's techniques of light drawing, retracing and erasure make it possible to see what began and what has remained, a visual motif consonant with her depiction of painful histories and their effects. Used in an "extended sketch," these formal devices also give her heavy narratives the intimacy of journal entries. Inspired by illustrative language and animation, her figures are consistently bound in outline as a form of containment and a metaphor conveying how stereotypes delimit us with overly broad strokes.

Offering a critical intervention on black female forms as historic sites for exoticism and denigration, her videos also activate and destabilize iconic 19th- and 20th-century images through fictional re-presentations. In a unique survival story, *The Swimming Lesson* (2004), a two-panel video of a black woman ostensibly learning to swim, we in fact witness a metanarrative of the Middle Passage. Each attempt to float and go underwater represents her learning psychological survival skills required for life during and after slavery. In *Dead White Men* (2005), she faithfully imitates the poses of female sitters in paintings by artists Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele on a bed of white sheets or in a stark white room. Taken out of context, emptied of its familiar frame and given focus for an uncomfortably long hold time (21 seconds), each pose is transformed into a symbolic position of vulnerability, disempowerment or exoticism. In *Untitled* (2005), the effects of these forms of representation are evident: a black woman in a bathtub tries to wash off her skin, traversing the political ravine that distinguishes a cleaning from a self-cleansing.

Through her focus on narrative, Charlton shows how certain fictions have become history. Presented and approached with formal subtlety, she grants interiority to what some only see in contours. In her hands, delicacy is deft.

SARAH LEWIS



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Dress Rehearsal, 2005

Spy, 2005

WOO, 2005

Tip Toe, 2005

ABOVE:

There Goes the Neighborhood, 2004 (details)