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Image Failure: Jimmy Robert Constructs A New Canon

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS | OCTOBER 03, 2016



Installation view of Jimmy Robert's "Descendances du nu (Descendance of the Nude)" at La Synagogue de Delme, 2016
(O.H. Dancy and Centre d'Art Contemporain - La Synagogue de Delme)

When we spoke over the phone one evening this summer, Jimmy Robert—who was born in Guadeloupe, raised in France, and is now based in Bucharest—had just returned from Delme, about an hour and 40 minutes east of Paris by high-speed rail, where his solo show, “Descendances du nu (Descendance of the Nude),” had recently opened at Synagogue de Delme (<http://www.cac-synagoguedelme.org/en/>). For the exhibition, Robert—who works across photography, film, performance, drawing, sculpture, and installation—took Marcel Duchamp as his muse. In the space (a synagogue converted into an exhibition venue), a curtain printed with the fractured, repeated image of Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2),” 1912, hung from the first-floor balcony. From an inaccessible passageway upstairs, an area once reserved only for women in the building’s previous incarnation, one could experience a sound piece by Ain Bailey, composed of monosyllabic female voices. Nearby, two works leaned on a staircase: Robert’s appropriations of images by three of appropriation art’s deftest female practitioners. He had subverted one of Louise Lawler’s photographs of a Gerhard Richter (/artists/gerhard-richter-291) painting with a borrowed Sturtevant appropriation of Duchamp—a multi-layered gesture that, while convoluted to describe, resulted in a visually simple pastiche.

Next to that work was a smaller piece that resembled one of Sherrie Levine's "Meltdowns," for which Levine condenses paintings by the likes of Monet into solid blocks of their representative colors. Robert's riff on this idea involved a similar reduction of Duchamp's "Nude," all of it in varying shades of brown.

"It was the 'Meltdowns' that led me from a discourse on gender to a discourse on skin," he tells me. A performance he developed for the opening in Delme used these Duchampian shades for fabric costumes.

(The artist also wore a soft sculpture of a set of steps as a sort of mask.) Robert, often on his hands and knees, became an embodied version of both the nude and the staircase;; meanwhile, fragments of Duchamp's original image were omnipresent across the gallery space.

"Even from my early days in art school, I was questioning the nature of the image," Robert says. He entered Goldsmiths at the University of London in 1996, in the wake of the YBAs. As he recalls, a decided shift was in the air, away from the boldness and shock tactics of his forerunners, many of whom were already being subsumed by the institutions they had set out to critique. "I wouldn't say there was a movement, but rather an energy—a desire to see something else," he explains. For Robert, the personal root of that desire was in his feeling that representation was failing. "There was always something that felt very unstable about it, and frustrating," he says. Robert started by interrogating the source of his discontent: Why did he feel that images were failing? What were they supposed to be doing—and how were they falling short? As he refined his self-questioning, he began to pose it a different way: "Do I feel representation is failing because it's not representing me?" He set about trying to correct this. In a series of multimedia installations, like his presentation at Delme or 2010's "Reprise," which uses Jeff Wall's photograph "A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)," 1993, as its prod, the artist breaks apart and reconfigures slivers of the art-historical canon, working to shake off their embedded (and often patriarchal) contexts. What Robert creates certainly arises from his unique perspective—black, gay, Caribbean-born, European-raised—but doesn't exclude other viewpoints. The work seeks to goad viewers into a similar state of introspection: "How do I see this work in relation to the context in which it has been created, and placed?" or, "How is my identity included (or excluded) within this legacy?"

Photography was a vital starting point for Robert, and it remains integral to his practice (he is one of four nominees for the Aimia Photography Prize at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where his work is on view through January 3.) During art school, he began by making collages of photographs torn, taped, crumpled, then re-scanned, what he describes as "trompe l'oeil surfaces—2-D and 3-D at the same time." He credits an interest in his prints' materiality with fostering a desire to use his body as a medium. "I was thinking of paper being like skin in its coarseness, and what goes through paper, how it's related to writing, and then to touch," he says. Performance, incorporating the spoken or written word, and the physicality of objects, he realized, could help address his questions around representation. Many of these concerns gel

in 2011's "Paramètres," in which Robert gently recites commands, beginning with the direction, "Set up the parameters. Adjust the structure." We see the artist shift into various poses, positioning paper cutouts of geometric shapes against his body, becoming a sort of human collage and temporary still image at once.

The first experience I'd had with Robert's work was through documentation of a performance he created with a group of his students from the Universität der Künste Berlin, whom he had flown to the Dominican Republic as part of his residency with the Davidoff Art Initiative to take part in a collaboration with students from the Altos de Chavón School of Design earlier this year. The campus amphitheater became a slow-moving mass of bodies encroaching on the venue, and into the audience, the space seeming floodlit by this sudden attention to corporeality from both performer and viewer. Robert tends to use the phrase "erotic conceptualism" to describe his approach. "It's not a conceptualism that's devoid of stances or positions, or that favors only ideas," he clarifies. But one that also permits "the sensory, and feelings, and emotions to come into play. Allowing some kind of sensual relationship with the work—not totally eradicating that possibility."