

Robert Colescott
“Troubled Goods: A Ten Year Survey (1997-2007)”
Meridian Gallery
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Reviewed by David Buuck

The recent survey of Oakland-bord Robert Colescott’s recent paintings demonstrated that he remains a vastly under-rated allegorist of the African-American tradition, continuing to forge his own signature path through the political unconscious of American race and gender relations. Curated by Peter Selz, this exhibit showcased several new works, featuring bold colors and gestures, emblematic of a highly attuned eye for the surreal visual landscapes of contemporary society. Colescott, though no mere satirist, uses ribald humor, exaggerated portraiture, and violent strokes of vivid color to chart his abstract figurations of a culture besotted with conflicted notions of race and sex. Throughout, the balance of broad compositional daring with improvisational aplomb revealed a signature take on issues in contemporary painting.

Like Guston, Colescott turned to figuration at a time when it was unfashionable in Western painting, though his investigation of African-American vernacular styles always kept his work from drifting into mere realism. His background as a jazz musician, as well as his tutelage under Leger, figures in his approach to composition, which pushes bold, seemingly impulsive strokes of energetic color against more concrete representations of figures, symbols, and motifs that appear in several works. Refusing to ever settle into a calm, orderly surface, Colescott’s canvasses remain unsettling, not only for their edgy images of racialized and sexualized figures, but also for the seeming clash of colors, styles, and motifs, challenging the viewer to come to terms with the overdetermined contradictions that are, after all, reflective of the culture from which Colescott mines his materials. Here one will not find any simple homilies to racial reconciliation or polite, liberal commentary, but rather a pitched, if always bitingly humorous, interrogation of the psychological clashes within American racial politics.

Several of the works show Colescott engaging art history, as well as broad social allegory, as starting points for surreal comedies of color and aesthetic improprieties. “April in Paris” (1998), for instance, features a brown bunny on a Parisian lady’s lap, with monkeys and “sambo” figures berating the figure with baby bottles, cigarettes, wine, and plumbing fixtures. “Olympia’s Fountain” re-imagines its titular character as a red-haired “negress” in white heels, surrounded by fried eggs, popcorn, cakes and pastries, a goddess for the fading empire of the consumer age. “W.M.D.: Remembering Sardanapalus” is an enormous canvas that reconfigures Delacroix as a violent field of reds and yellows. In “A Taste of Gumbo” (1990), a white matron sips her soup as a team of black waiters, prisoners, card sharks, and a series of orange crabs, suggesting alongside many of the other paintings the ongoing relationship between white connoisseurship of black culture and the stereotypes that comes with that.

Throughout the exhibit, Colescott's ongoing investigation of African-American vernacular culture demonstrated itself in a series of paintings exploring racial themes. "Boxer-etta" (2002) was an abstract portrait of a boxer, seemingly fighting his own shadow, or the shadows of representation that might "box him in" as a stereotype. Similarly, "Pick a Ninny Rose" (1999) is a giant canvass engaging Mexican, Native, Christian and African-American icons against a backdrop of pop culture images and figures, as if to suggest that ethnic types are as superficial and empty as consumer brands.

Elsewhere, Colescott's feverous jazz-like approach to abstraction overwhelms the canvass with ecstatic joy. "Ascension" (2003) features bold reds and magentas splashing across a field in jazzy fiestas of color and movement, suggesting the bustle of the crowd, with tumbling bodies and faces. "Tastess Lik Chickens" (2001) likewise uses thick brushstrokes and thick dollops of paint to parse out classic Colescott symbols such as pyramids, skulls, and lightbulbs. The mixed-media works "Red Skirt" and "The Bearded Lady" include bubble wrap and torn clothing, pushing the paintings out into sculptural dimensions, while elsewhere black and white lithographs and aquatints showcased Colescott's range as a painter. Throughout, Colescott's sense of color, composition, and imagery demonstrate a daring approach to that thin line between good and bad "taste," never allowing us to rest easily in the beauty of his paintings, as they all challenge the traditions by which we might judge that very notion of "beauty."

Despite the odd and sometimes disorienting layout of the Meridian Gallery's three-floor exhibition, Colescott's oversized canvasses sang out without overshadowing their confines. Given the breadth of work on display here, it is clear that Colescott is still at the top of his form, even as he enters his seventies.