



WARDELL MILAN: LANDSCAPES! ROMANCE, ROTTENNESS

2010 october 22 through december 8, clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tennessee



Heroine: nude and landscape #6, 2009, Collage, 20" x 14"



Heroine: nude and landscape #9, 2009, Collage, 20" x 14"





One could still dream to devise an optimistic antidote against the defeatist and cynical claims of the return to order, 2008, Digital C-print, 40" x 50"

Wardell Milan's exhibition *Landscape! Romance, Rottenness* brings together two distinct bodies of work. The first is made up of photographs the artist takes of his wildly energetic, tabletop dioramas, and the second are a series of almost demure collages. In each the artist uses lush, seductive imagery to lure the audience into carefully layered scenes. These different bodies of work examine the nuances and shadows of the complex world whence they came. Milan has laid out a menagerie of his obsessions and desires, assembled with the goal of creating an examination that is at once highly personal and intentionally common.

The figural and structural aspects of Milan's elaborately detailed dioramas are built using collaged photographic images. The images are culled from the artist's collection of personal snapshots, magazines, and books that favor a variety of subjects: travel, fashion, pornography, and home & garden publications. While the myriad sources in the hand-built dioramas can at first be dizzying, it is Milan's uncanny skill for creating narratives that address the complex world of race and sexuality that eventually transfixes the audience. For example, in the mesmerizing and bizarre *Christopher Columbus' Discovery of the New World*, a cut-out white man in a sparkly, silver spacesuit stands atop a crude rocket ship that appears to have crash-landed in the middle of a busy African street. The labyrinthine diorama is assembled using a playful pairing of three-dimensional objects and the photographic cut-outs. The objects include architectural elements, green sphagnum moss, Columbus' aluminum foil covered rocket, and toy models of early 70s-era muscle cars. The flat pieces make up the landscape backdrops, exotic animals, and various figures. It is as if Columbus' onlookers, a sampling of people from the vastly diverse African continent, were all brought to one place to bear witness to this historical event. To further the effect, the artist uses images from old and new sources to people his scenes. The variations in light quality, colors, and textures found in each of the figures make it clear that his sources span many years; as a result, the scenes can't be pinned down to any one specific era in a particular culture or place. While the photographs depict disparate scenes, each one also runs the gamut of emotions and responses. There is the tragic African child staring down at a copy of *Ebony* magazine, the ridiculous astronaut in his silly suit, the oblivious couple making out in the corner, and the hair-curlers woman nonchalantly walking down the street carrying what appears to be a Chris Ofili painting.

These juxtapositions highlight points of commonality as much as they detail differences.

While the small, quiet collages from the *Heroine and Landscape* series may seem entirely unrelated from the densely packed photographs, this aspect of Milan's practice is as closely related in craft as it is in concept. The small collages are certainly more pared-down. Each presents a single figure in a formless void. Pulled from a book by the photographer Paolo Roversi that features full-body shots of female models, the heroines are slender the photographs are so slight and over-lit that at first glance they appear to be graphite drawings on creamy white paper. With each piece Milan subtly adds, removes, and weaves various layers of visual information. In most we find that the artist has cut away passages of the figure and inserted photographs of other figures, landscapes, or drawings of skeletal passages, plants, or flowers. The images are so spare that each move must be carefully considered and thoughtfully weighed by the artist. The figure and the landscape become one in these poetic hybridizations that are at once beautiful and disquieting. In many of the pieces it is as if the landscape becomes a kind of clothing or armor; in others, it is as if the viewer is able to see through the figure to the landscape within. The particular use of imagery and materiality in these delicate assemblages points to the frailty of the human body while at the same time exploring it as a potential site for ornamentation.

Wardell Milan's multi-lateral studio practice allows his work to follow various paths. Whether it is the two bodies of work seen in Clough-Hanson or his other series (*Smooth Girls, Battle Royale, or Desire and the Black Masseur*) the artist uses a variety of approaches to build up, tear apart, and re-present a wide array of accumulated visual information. Within each series we find the human figure with all its strengths and weaknesses at the heart of the narratives. We also sense the presence of the artist through the evidence of his hand as it manipulates and shapes the scenes. In these powerful works we see Milan's desire to explore, re-imagine, and tease out the tenuous connections between people and the worlds that shape them, and that, in turn are shaped by them.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery



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