

ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

January 2009



Rodney McMillian

THE KITCHEN

"The challenge of the next half century," said Lyndon B. Johnson at the University of Michigan in 1964, "is whether we have the wisdom to use [our] wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization." Los Angeles-based artist Rodney McMillian, who in recent years has delivered Johnson's famous "Great Society" speech at numerous art venues, might argue that the past fifty years have not lived up to the former president's hopeful vision. McMillian's art has, without seeming merely didactic, patiently explored the social fissures—in particular, those along racial

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and economic lines—that still rend our “great” society. At the Kitchen, the artist presented an installation (inspired by Cormac McCarthy’s postapocalyptic novel *The Road*) that drew on the power of sacred architecture to elevate his secular concerns. On their own, the paintings, sculptures, and photographs may seem somewhat abstract, largely divorced from current events. Considered in the context of McMillian’s earlier artworks, however, they become a forceful, plangent lament for the degrading inequities many in America still encounter every day.

Five mural-size, bannerlike paintings hung on the walls of the gallery; interspersed among them were columns of framed black-and-white photographs, found at flea markets and antique stores, depicting anonymous individuals and couples young and old. At the center of the space rested a dirty old rug and an armchair, both doused with red paint, beneath a six-pointed canopy made of white paper and tape. A pile of Internet printouts of nursery-rhyme lyrics (“John Brown Had a Little Soldier,” “Baa Baa Black Sheep”)—intoned by an actor during a performance at the show’s opening reception—was laid on the chair. The unstretched paintings depict part of a brick house, tree branches, and what may be interpreted (somewhat liberally) as a figure being torn apart; all are awash in scarlet. A fourth canvas is an abstract agglomeration of red, white, and black paint that resembles viscera. The title of Edmund Wilson’s study of the literature of the Civil War, *Patriotic Gore*, came immediately to mind while I looked at these works, as did painter Barnaby Furnas’s enormous crimson floods. (The installation as a whole also evoked Robert Gober’s sober 2005 exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery.)

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In McMillian's 2006 exhibition at Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, eighteen cardboard-and-duct tape "minimalist objects," made to look like coffins, were arranged haphazardly throughout the space. These works foregrounded precisely what our government was at the time taking great pains to obscure—images of dead American soldiers. By deploying at the Kitchen a spatial arrangement that imbued the gallery with a sacred aura, McMillian even more powerfully dredged up the violence that has underpinned American history and offered an ironic counterpoint to the rhetoric of hope embodied by Johnson's speech (and those of today's politicians). Whereas McCarthy, in his book, looks forward, McMillian plays the role of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, pushed forward while looking back upon a landscape of ruins.

In the elated afterglow of Barack Obama's election on November 4, during which time I first viewed the exhibition, the disenchantment and anxiety that characterize McMillian's installation risked seeming anachronistic. But as that moment passes and we enter more fully into our own historical crisis, we will come to depend increasingly on eloquent, historically aware interpreters of our tumultuous era. In the introduction to his book, Wilson asked, "Has there ever been another historical crisis of the magnitude of 1861–1865 in which so many people were so articulate?" We are not as fortunate in today's culture of distraction. Yet McMillian, with this exhibition, proves he is among the artists to whom we should look.

—*Brian Sholis*