

Review - 01 Sep 2017

Tau Lewis, Curtis Santiago and Daniel Rios Rodriguez

Cooper Cole, Toronto, Canada

By Charles Reeve

The stolid figure of Tau Lewis's sculpture *You Lose Shreds of Your Truth Every Time I Remember You* (all works 2017) took me aback as I glimpsed it through the gallery's window. Life-sized, clad in rolled-up cut-offs and casual shoes, holding a wire monkey by a leash, he leans forward in his chair, physically and emotionally shattered, but controlling the space. He doesn't care that he shouldn't go shirtless in a gallery. He's not belligerent, but he's self-assured and wants relief from the hot day.

I did a double take when I observed how alive the figure seems, despite being fashioned somewhat roughly from both conventional and more unusual materials: plaster, stones, acrylic paint and stuff listed, intriguingly, as 'secret objects'. Similarly, in *Untitled (Play Dumb to Catch Wise)*, a smaller figure (perhaps Lewis as a child) sits in a rocking chair but lacks the energy to rock. The exhausted but aware visage enacts the Jamaican proverb in the subtitle, feigning cluelessness so as to be clued in.

Deliberately or not, this subtitle recalls both William Shakespeare (his fellow 'wise enough to play the fool' in *Twelfth Night*) and Italian reggae personality Alborosie's 'Play Fool (To Catch Wise)' (2013) – a range suiting the expansiveness of this two-person exhibition that Lewis shares with Curtis Santiago. The show encompasses work that, while distinct, overlaps thematically and aesthetically. 'I don't want to talk about diaspora anymore,' says Santiago, quoted in the improbably poetic exhibition statement. 'I want to create spaces to think about it. Mobility is necessary and luxurious and peculiar given our past.' Mobility can be physical (as when Lewis's father arrived in Canada from Jamaica, or Santiago's family from Trinidad), but also intellectual or emotional. Thus Lewis's self-representation seems to ponder her out-of-placeness – or perhaps, if we follow in the vein of Homi Bhabha's thinking, 'between-placeness'. The face in Santiago's painting *Higher Self-Portrait* floats toward us from its spray-painted background; its indistinct edges feel ethereal while invoking the visual codes of graffiti and urban grit, and its oversized in glasses turn the tables by transforming the viewer into the viewed.



Tau Lewis, Curtis Santiago and Daniel Rios Rodriguez, 'Through the people we are looking at ourselves', 2017, installation view, Cooper Cole. Courtesy: Cooper Cole, Toronto

Meanwhile, in Cooper Cole's downstairs space, Daniel Rios Rodriguez's solo exhibition similarly employs a rough-edged aesthetic to thematize issues of identities that refuse to be limited by the synthetic boundaries of nation-states. For example, the upright snake in the colourful, impatiently hewn *Nerodia* suggests a do-it-yourself caduceus or rod of Asclepius (alluding to, respectively, commerce and healing) while its name references a water snake common to Rodriguez's home state of Texas yet found throughout North America. The *Nerodia* is a curious figure for resistant, mobile identity: widespread, tough, adaptable, but dully coloured and non-venomous. Nonetheless, without capturing much attention, it has infiltrated a huge geographical range, which it seems destined to occupy for centuries to come.

Still, for me, Rodriguez's most compelling piece is his mid-sized, untitled graphite drawing on a paper oval, completed in 2017. Bounded by a drawing of a cord (is the similarity to Pablo Picasso's 1912 *Still Life with Chair Caning deliberate?*), it bursts with images of plants, sunsets (or sunrises?), landscapes and water, rendered in a vaguely cartoonish way that imparts a remarkable energy. This vigour seems like the flipside of the emotional exhaustion that characterizes many of the works in these two shows: maybe an emblem of a time and place beyond the historical conditions that perpetuate diaspora, where enforced travel and the fatigue it generates come to an end.