

Donohue, Marlena. Review, *ArtSceneCal.com* (October 2008).

It is problematic to mention that Brenna Youngblood is an artist of color. First we are still debating what that designation means and why it is relevant to mention it, and second it sounds like affirmative action. No one ever mentions that an artist is a “white male” as an immediate preamble to discussing a body of work. On the other hand, to be a young African American woman artist who has been honored by College Art Association, and who has exhibited widely and in high prestige venues is an emblem of the change and redress that is just too tempting to ignore.



Youngblood continues to explore two tacks: conceptual photography, and multimedia collage and paint work. One hates to cite a dead white guy as an antecedent when the premise is to take Youngblood on her own merits, but the feeling she achieves--and surpasses--in the large collage and paint works shares something with Robert Rauschenberg’s vegetable dye photo collages. In these she incorporates brushed pigments, spray paint, vintage images of bric a brac, photos taken by the artist, passages from mass media pulp, images of US currency, reproductions of Dutch still lifes like those often done (not coincidentally) by the few women allowed to paint in the 17th century. It’s all nestled inside veils of lush abstract paint, some brushed thin so we can see through, some aerosoled thick and gummy. In one untitled work, American paper money, imbedded notes and pigment overtake an image of Abraham Lincoln, his mouth occluded by a bit of painted color. Our mythological liberator becomes one of many floating signifiers this work requires us to resolve. Here Lincoln seems complicitous in a manifest destiny of nation, race and manhood he both helped to erect and to dismantle. Next to his face is a passage of delicate collaged florals. All of Youngblood’s pastiched flowers call up mementos pressed in diaries and the way that memory, desire and vested intention can reconfigure all that we know.



Having cautiously referenced Rauschenberg’s lineage, Youngblood is distinctly less aloof. She makes her presence known to us via her painterly touch and the way she can invoke the very specific nature of her experience as a black woman defining a morphing sense of self.



By virtue of the alternate allure and braininess, these painted collages are also ruminations on decoration, and on America’s deep rooted Puritan resistance to anything overly sensual. There is also a nod to the never-ending death and rebirth of beauty in art discourse, and to the historically racist fear of those “out of control” dark skinned peoples who dangerously “feel” more often than think. These automatic binaries-- beauty-concept; sense-sensibility, black-white, feminine-male, mechanical reproduction-the slight of the hand--are taken up by Youngblood but with

enough subtlety that the rhetoric(s) creep up on you, come into focus and then fades out again.

In the smaller scale conceptual photos this ambiguity is a little harder hitting, played out with odd shooting angles, eccentric decisions of orientation and cropping. In "Crown," we never quite know what we are seeing exactly. It seems to be a cheap, tacky chandelier attached to a cracking roof (both markers of "low taste"), but it's somehow re-presented up close and from beneath, so that the roof becomes a platform, the kitsch crystals which normally hang become stiff jewels studding a tiara. The unhinging of basic spatial and temporal ideas, the lowbrow-to-highbrow slippages she plays with go well beyond post modern ambiguity. This is a more profound and directed yanking asunder of our perceptual and cognitive habits.

The strategy is perhaps clearest in a photo of a pathetic, aged TV mounted high in a decrepit room on a dilapidated perch with makeshift wiring coming out of a hole in the wall. We see the TV from the side, at an angle and perspective that again defies gravity, subverts function, and challenges our hardwired axial reflexes of up-down. This requires us to work to make order of the data, but in the end we still process the cliché of urban blight: "welfare Moms," poverty, seedy motel rooms, generic "low living," and all the race, gender, class assumptions tucked neatly therein. The elastic, insistent ways in which seeing-thinking habits reconstitute themselves in the artist and viewer, the ways in which such habits are opened and closed, expanded and resisted in all human communication---these are both tools and themes in Youngblood's handsome and complex work.