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Local Color: The Black African Presence in Venetian Art and History

VENICE HOLDS A SPECIAL POSITION in the long and complicated history of Christian Europe's interactions with peoples of black African descent, and Fred Wilson's engagement with this topic in his 2003 Biennale installation opens up a rich array of intriguing cultural material. As inhabitants of a primary point of entry to and departure from Western Europe, Venetians have always been especially sensitive to ethnic identities and cultural boundaries. While Venice may never have been the European city with the largest black population, and though influential representations of black Africans have also appeared in many other regions, from the 12TH to the 18TH centuries and to some degree up to the present day, Venice maintained an unparalleled sustained contact with black African people and generated a remarkable variety of visual images of blacks.

Even at the beginning of the 21ST century, Venetian artisans still turn out a flood of objects—in the forms of decorative wood and plaster statuary, brass door knockers, glass tchotchkes, and jewelry—depicting black Africans. The antique stores and craft shops of Venice are far more thickly populated with such figures than those of any other city. Most of these objects deliberately, if often crudely, hark back to the traditions of the Venetian Rococo, but that imagery in turn points back to motifs and iconographic innovations of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This essay will focus on those earlier centuries, though with some consideration of later material from the 1600s, 1700s, and even the 1800s.

The volume of surviving Venetian images of blacks from before 1800 is impressive. A rapid and still incomplete count totals well over four hundred works, many of which contain more than one African figure. Most of the best-known Venetian artists—Carpaccio, Titian, Veronese, Tiepolo—are well represented, and the most flourishing eras of Venetian painting (the 16TH and 18TH centuries) also provide the richest selection. Many of these images have, of course, left the city of the lagoons, but at least one hundred can still be seen in Venetian churches, public buildings, and museums. They present black Africans in a range of roles, stretching from holy monarchs to executioners. The best way to start looking at these images is to evoke the experience of a visitor to Piazza San Marco and the sacred and civic buildings adjoining it, for in this historic heart of Venice and the entire Venetian Republic, an influential and varied set of representations was (and is) on display.

The earliest of these were to be found in the basilica of San Marco. Three images from the late 11TH and 12TH centuries, rooted in the traditions of Byzantine art, show an evangelical, egalitarian, and at the same time imperial urge to count dark-skinned peoples among those to be ruled by Christ and (implicitly) the Venetian State. In each case the subject is Pentecost, the

descent of the holy spirit upon the apostles, which the New Testament describes as occurring fifty days after Christ's resurrection. The biblical text mentions tongues of flame that inspire the apostles to be able to speak every language and thus seek the conversion of all the many nationalities then present in Jerusalem. In the two small but preciously ornamented panels depicting the Pentecost on the *Pala d'Oro*, the bejeweled and enameled treasure of the church's high altar, there is space for only two figures to embody the peoples of the world the apostles will convert. In each case, one is dark-skinned and the other is light, as if to express in the most compressed way the physical variety of humanity.

The biblical text lists sixteen nationalities among those addressed by the apostles, but none is obviously a black African group. This anomaly is explained by the vast mosaic decoration of one of the domes in the nave of San Marco, where the third Pentecost image appears. Sixteen pairs of men are located below the apostles, and the two white-robed men labeled as Egyptians are the only ones with dark-brown skin. The Egyptian population, then as now, included a wide assortment of skin colors; in both Byzantine and early Venetian art, Egyptians are more often shown with light skin, but when difference or diversity was specially important, dark skin was emphasized. In Pentecost images, that dark skin signified the universality of the apostles' mission; but not far away in San Marco, a black Egyptian suggested a different message. In the Cappella Zen, once part of the porch of the church, a ca. 1270 mosaic of the Martyrdom of St. Mark shows Venice's patron being beaten by a black in the course of his martyrdom in Alexandria.

Here the dark skin is connected to an already venerable tradition in Western culture that linked blackness with sin, evil, and lifelessness. A few feet away, in the porch of San Marco, another 13TH-century mosaic depicts Adam's body, as yet only inanimate earth but about to be endowed by God with life and a soul, as a dark brown. Whereas the Pentecost and St. Mark images do imply an ethnic identity, the depiction of Adam uses color only as an abstract sign.

So far, none of these San Marco images incorporates any treatment of hair or facial features that might suggest black African identity. In sculpture, however, such secondary physiognomic indicators were usually necessary and present. On the exterior of San Marco's south facade, adjacent to the Cappella Zen, stands a ca. 1300 limestone sculpture of a griffin seizing a black African. The early stereotype of black African features, which has changed only a little in Western art up to the present, is visible: tightly curled hair, full lips, and a nose with a flattened bridge but upturned tip. While the intended meaning of this image is hard to pin down, since the griffin itself alludes to the demonic, the helpless black probably stands for sinfulness justly punished. This forceful and frightening image would have been one of the first figurative elements of the church visible as one approached the building from the Molo, the nearest major landing point for those who arrived at San Marco by boat.

The xenophobic tone of this sculpture would have been tempered, however, by an artwork erected about fifty years later which an observer approaching from the Molo would have noticed before reaching the church. One of the famous carved capitals of the ground-level arcade of the Ducal Palace bore the head of a turbaned black African man. Created about 1350 by the workshop of Filippo Calendario, this head appeared with that of a Central Asian man and two others who are more difficult to classify. The capital as a whole (now inside the Ducal Palace and replaced by a faithful modern copy) is apparently dedicated to the display of human diversity, and neatly fits within the encyclopedic theme of the entire cycle of capitals.

Indeed, the larger group of sculptures which inaugurated the decoration of the Palace's arcade depicts the Drunkenness of Noah before his sons Ham, Shem, and Japheth; the three sons were recognized as the ultimate ancestors of the inhabitants of all parts of the earth. No ethnic variation is discernable in the figures of the sons, however, despite an evolving textual tradition that held that Ham or one of his offspring had dark skin.

We will eventually return to the Ducal Palace, but our next examples come from a structure on the other side of San Marco, the famous clock tower which was erected in the 1490s to mark the entrance to the commercial streets leading toward the city's other urban nexus, Rialto. The most familiar parts of the tower's sculptural decoration are the so-called "Mori," two bronze automata who strike the hours on the bell at the top of the structure. But their nickname, coined long after their installation, is misleading. While the word *moro*, or Moor, often did signify black African identity in Renaissance culture, apart from the darkness of their weathered bronze these statues bear no other features associated with Africa. Instead they are Wild Men, a type of fantastic, uncivilized, but generally European outsider, conceived as uninhibited and primitive residents of the forest.

Beneath the Wild Men but in a more honorific position, however, the statue of an African black does appear. Another set of automata representing the Three Wise Men of the East, otherwise known as Magi and Kings, were originally intended to emerge from a space inside the tower every hour as the bells were struck, adoring the Christ Child and his seated

mother. (Today, the frequency of their appearance is much diminished.) The statues of the Magi were designed by Gian Paolo and Gian Carlo Rainieri of Reggio, who were also the makers of the mechanism of the clock, but the sculptures were practically remade by G. B. Alviero during a restoration of 1755. However, there is no reason to think that the black African Magus visible today is very different from the figure originally installed in 1499. If that is true, this Wise Man was probably the first of his kind visible in a public setting in Venice. The prominence of his position, his repeated kinetic performance, and the brilliant color of his painted surface, would have made him the most striking African presence in the zone of the Piazza.

How was this Wise Man read by those who passed by? In the 1860s, the American writer William Dean Howells regarded him as a parody

of princely demeanor, but Howells's vision was clouded by the racism of Civil War America. At the end of the 15TH century, the black Magus had become the foremost holy African in Western Art, and the royal status of the Magi endowed him with an aura of both sacred and secular authority. The product of a slow evolution in medieval texts and then visual representations, the black Magus made his debut in images in the German and Czech territories of the Holy Roman Empire during the decades around 1400. The earliest major Italian version of the black Magus



Andrea Mantegna,
Adoration of the Magi,
tempera, early 1460s,
Uffizi, Florence
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was painted by Andrea Mantegna shortly after 1460, and as in many later pictures the majestic African king is accompanied by several dark-skinned retainers. Mantegna was a native of Padua and thus a Venetian subject, but though he was the brother-in-law of the Venetian master painters Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, his *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned after he settled in the Marquisate of Mantua.

While a few Venetian artists experimented with the motif of an African Magus in the later 1400s, and some German and Flemish examples of this character were probably imported, the clock-tower sculpture must have been something of a novelty. The first surviving Venetian altarpiece with an African Magus appears a bit later, in a 1526 picture by Palma Vecchio for the church of S. Elena. Titian, Bonifazio de' Pitati, Paolo Veronese, and virtually every other major Venetian painter then took up the African Wise Man, and there are nearly a hundred extant Venetian incarnations of this figure (more than thirty of which can still be seen in Venice itself).

Some of these paintings, like Palma's, hung over altars, but other settings were more common. Many large canvases of the Adoration were *lateral*, placed in front of altars at a ninety-degree angle so that the procession of the Kings toward the holy child mirrored that of the churchgoer toward the altar. This arrangement made it particularly obvious that the black King was almost always the youngest and last in line of the three, as was already true with the clock-tower statues and Mantegna's painting. (There are a few instances, especially in paintings from Venice's mainland territories, where the black King is second in age and position, but he is never first.)

This compositional scheme certainly expresses some degree of racial subordination among the Wise Men, though such an idea is never explicit in texts about the Magi. Those texts also assigned the Magi names, though there is little consensus about which monarch bore which name. Venetians probably understood the African King to be Caspar (Gaspere) or perhaps Balthasar (Baldassare), and many Venetians and other Italians were baptized with these names, thus increasing the potential for identifying with the black Magus. Such identification by Venetian patricians with the Magi, black and white, is also visible in the many paintings of the Adoration made to decorate Venetian tax offices in the mid-1500s. The idea was to encourage payment as a sacred duty, analogous to the Magi's presentation of gifts to Jesus, but the patrician officers who commissioned these works also placed their coats of arms, and sometimes themselves, near the Kings.

One indication of the solid establishment of the African Magus in Venetian art is the character's appearance in a mosaic near the high altar in San Marco of 1588–89. This Adoration was designed by Tintoretto and Giannantonio Marini, and though it is hardly one of the most impressive instances of the black Magus, it undoubtedly served as an authoritative endorsement of the imagery, which remained standard into the age of Tiepolo.

Tintoretto's black Magus wears a turban, as had Mantegna's (resting on the ground beside him) and the clock-tower sculpture's. The turban does not necessarily link the figures to Islam, but both the headgear and the sumptuous robes of these Magi mark them as belonging to civilized and wealthy societies. On the clock tower, this feature is in strong contrast to the rough hairy bodies and primitive dress (skins, twigs, and leaves) of the Wild Men striking the bell. Of all the factors that contributed to the rise of the black Magus in Venetian and indeed European art, one is especially relevant to this sophisticated aspect of the character. From the

1340s to at least the 1520s, white Christian Europeans took an emphatic interest in the black Christian state of Ethiopia and its emperor, usually called (as a title) Prester John. A spectacular world map produced in the Venetian monastery of S. Michele in 1459, now in the Library of St. Mark's opposite the Ducal Palace, contained the most extensive cartographic data about Ethiopia of its time. Though the reality was more prosaic, Prester John was imagined by many European writers and statesmen as a rich and resplendent monarch, exotic but also potentially an engaged ally against intervening Muslim powers. Prester John and his artistic stand-in the African Magus were, to white Europeans, "others" whose physical and geographical differences tended to dissolve, revealing familiar ideals and aspirations.

Some of Prester John's subjects, typically Ethiopian monks from Jerusalem making pilgrimages to Rome, passed through Venice in the 1400s, but at the same time black Africans of another sort begin to appear in the city. Dark-skinned slaves from African regions well south of the Mediterranean coast, along with many other slaves of the most various nationalities, passed through the markets of North Africa, the Levant, and the Black Sea, and some ended up in Eastern Spain, Southern France, Sicily, and the growing cities of mainland Italy. Venice's maritime nature and its close commercial links to the ports of the Aegean and Egypt ensured that it would be part of the late medieval trade in slaves. While a few such captives may have been taken from Christian zones in or near Ethiopia, the course of Islamic expansion makes it likely that most came from the Sudan and areas further to the west. By the end of the 15th century, these older patterns of commerce in humans had been supplemented by the rapidly growing Portuguese slave trade whose source was the coastal regions of West Africa.

One of the several Italians who collaborated with or helped to finance the Portuguese navigators in their West Africans endeavors was Alvise da Mosto, a member of an old Venetian patrician family. Da Mosto's invaluable account of his travels in the coastal and riverine areas of modern Senegal and Gambia during the 1450s includes many details about local customs and skills. Perhaps just because he was a native of the lagoons, da Mosto was impressed by the

local oarsmen, who—like Venetians—rowed their boats standing up, but did not require a vertical oarlock (a *forcola*, in Venetian) to do so. Da Mosto was even more struck by the powerful swimming technique of the Africans, calling them the best in the world.

Though there is no evidence that da Mosto brought black captives back to Venice, by the 1490s several Venetian works of art and written texts reveal, to quote Marino Sanuto's 1493 guidebook to Venice, that the city's thousands of gondolas were rowed "by black Muslims, or by other servants who know how to row." Two exquisite paintings by Vittore Carpaccio (*Miracle of the True Cross* and *Heron Hunt in the Lagoon*) each show two African rowers, as if to stress that blacks were commonly employed for this purpose. It is impossible to be sure if these oarsmen were slaves or free. Sanuto does not characterize them exclusively as bondsmen, and Carpaccio's pictures show the men in various degrees of fancy dress, presumably supplied by their employers. While rowing galleys was associ-

Detail of Vittore Carpaccio, *Miracle of the True Cross*, oil, 1494, from the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, now Accademia, Venice
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Marco Marziale, *Supper at Emmaus*, oil, 1506, Accademia, Venice
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a visible minority of several hundred people. And there were Afro-Venetian women and children as well: in 1491, Isabella d'Este, Marquise of Mantua, and her mother Eleonora of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara, tried to outbid each other for the right to hire the five-person family of an apparently free black gondolier. The very young black children—"the blacker the better," as Isabella put it—were much in demand as fashionable pages at North Italian courts, a practice the Venetians did not emulate until later.

But it would be unwise to romanticize the situation of most Afro-Venetians at this time: a harsh Venetian fugitive slave law of 1489 orders that "the Ethiopian [that is, black] or Muslim male and female slaves of whatever type" who are bold enough to flee should be branded and then beaten while being forced to run from San Marco to Rialto. This gauntlet would have begun near the site of the clock tower, and even when the black Wise Man was installed here a decade after the law was passed, it would have been of little solace to recaptured slaves. Perhaps they saw themselves as more like the bell relentlessly beaten by the Wild Men higher up.

If we want to envision the harsher reality of Venetian slavery, we might turn from Carpaccio's elegant gondoliers in *Miracle of the True Cross* to the nearly naked black African ready to dive into a canal in Gentile Bellini's *Miracle at San Lorenzo* of 1500. Both paintings were part of a cycle produced for the Confraternity of St. John the Evangelist. Gentile's diver reminds us of da Mosto's masterful West African swimmers, but however skillful the diver may be, the fallen relic of the cross will elude him; only the pale-skinned and white-robed prior of the confraternity will be permitted to rescue this prize. The diver's dark-brown skin is both a reference to the contemporary social fabric which these artists were so anxious to document, and also a more charged symbol of a marginal status, of not belonging to the sacred center of Venetian religious life.

When Carpaccio and his contemporaries were asked to create exotic rather than familiar local settings for sacred stories, they maintained an African presence in these pictures. Whether the saint is George, Jerome, Stephen, Mark, or Ursula, black Africans in Middle Eastern dress form a part of the observing crowds. Venetians must have seen the blacks resident in their city as connecting them to the cosmopolitan and diverse populations of the North African and

ated with slavery in this era, the rowers of private vessels are more likely to have had the status of coachmen, and as any Venetian can testify, rowing the boats of the lagoon requires great skill. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how these black Africans would have initially arrived in Venice other than as slaves. Manumission was common, especially upon the death of a slave-owner, and a 1528 will ordains that a black to be freed at the death of his master is to have a *traghetto* (gondola ferry route) purchased for him so that he might support himself.

An estimate of what we might call the Afro-Venetian population around 1500 is hard to make, but if blacks comprised even ten percent of those who rowed gondolas they would have been

Levantine ports with which they traded. In Marco Marziale's 1506 *Supper at Emmaus*, the turbaned African waiter in a spectacular multihued garment may be either local color, so to speak, or a way of showing that the miracle took place in the Holy Land. His extraordinary prominence bespeaks some as yet unknown special meaning, but in retrospect this youth also looks like the precursor of a vast new genre, the African children and adults who attend to the guests at painted feasts by Veronese from the third quarter of the 16th century and in numerous variations on this theme by 17th- and 18th-century Venetian artists.

Art historians have sometimes wondered whether the dozens of black servants and pages in Veronese's canvases might have been fantasies of courtly luxury rather than accurate depictions of contemporary Venetian life, and there can be no doubt that Veronese gilds the lily in these works. The subjects of these feast paintings are, like Marziale's, biblical, and the artist's self-declared license to ornament a sacred subject as he saw fit means that he need not have worried about documentary exactitude. But such archival records as we have of the presence of Africans in Venice in the later 1500s (and it ought to be said that scanning for black Africans is far easier in visual images than it is in the written record) suggest that Veronese's black waiters are not entirely imaginary, and that they simultaneously characterize the subjects they appear in as familiar and exotic. Afro-Venetian parents had Afro-Venetian children, and two portraits by Titian (*Laura Dianti* of ca. 1523 and *Fabricius Salvaesius* of 1558) include black pages who may correspond to particular individuals.

Though there are a few drawings by Veronese which might have been sketches of black children from life, the black pages and older waiters in the artist's feast paintings are conventional types who recur from image to image. The famous *Feast in the House of Levi* of 1573 has nine African figures of this sort, ranging from children in gorgeous European livery, to young adults hefting a tray of roast lamb, to a brownish assistant steward in red clothing. When this painting, created as a Last Supper for the dining hall of the monastery of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, caught the unwelcome attention of the Venetian Inquisition, Veronese was attacked for having added so many extraneous details to a crucial and solemn sacred subject. The chief inquisitor mentioned the *buffoni* (buffoons, a telling term used in this period to describe dwarfs, jesters, and young black

servants) as particularly objectionable additions. But the Venetian patricians who held a majority of seats on the board of the Inquisition were not likely to have been so disturbed. The artist was able to resolve the canvas's transgressions simply by changing its title, to a rare subject where Christ defends his right to bring his teaching to the sinners who need it.

Veronese continued to be the favored painter of the Venetian ruling class, and while he became more cautious about feast paintings, he continued to include African servants in many of his works. Some, it is true, appear among the persecutors of Christian martyrs, reviving a type of imagery hostile to blacks that we first encountered in San Marco around 1270. But a far greater number of Veronese's black Africans are simply servants or bystanders. In one of the painter's grandest and gaudiest expressions of Venetian state ideology, the 1585 *Triumph of*



Detail of Paolo Veronese, *Feast in the House of Levi*, oil, 1573, from SS. Giovanni e Paolo, now Accademia, Venice
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Detail of Paolo Veronese, *Triumph of Venice*, oil, 1585, ceiling, Sala del Maggior Consiglio, Palazzo Ducale, Venice
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These works of art were created in response to episodes of conflict with the Ottoman Empire, but there were also periods when Venice was at peace with the Turks, and trade with the Ottomans continued to be a major source of Venetian wealth. Between the early 1540s and the late 1560s relations were mostly cordial and productive. Veronese's 1562–63 *Marriage at Cana* not only includes the usual set of black waiters, but also, remarkably, a handsome and aristocratic black man in luxurious green robes who is seated at the banqueting table among the most important guests. His turban suggests he may be an Ottoman, though, literally speaking, as a guest at this wedding banquet he should be a Jew. His regal bearing is also reminiscent of the black Magus. In retrospect, however, the character he mostly closely evokes is a literary rather than a visual one: Othello.

Detail of Titian, *Pesaro Altarpiece*, oil, 1526, S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice
© SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK; S. MARIA GLORIOSA DEI FRARI, VENICE, ITALY

Venice from the ceiling of the Great Council Hall of the Ducal Palace, a liveried black page silhouetted against the heavens occupies the very center of the composition. No other image so clearly articulates the subordinate but nevertheless significant role played by African figures in Venetian culture's self-definition.

The centrality of the black youth in the *Triumph of Venice* is all the more interesting in the light of a continuing artistic tradition which linked black Africans to Venice's Ottoman enemies. Titian's *Pesaro Altarpiece* of 1526, still in the church of the Frari, displays a defeated light-skinned Turk accompanied by a black African retainer. Just a few feet away in the same church, the massive Baroque tomb of Doge Giovanni Pesaro (1669, by Melchior Barthel and Baldassare Longhena) rests on four colossal black stone statues of straining African captives. The tomb's inscription makes it clear that these figures are emblems of the doge's (mostly hollow) claims of victory against the Ottomans. A 1619 painting by Baldassare d'Anna (now in S. Maria Formosa) entitled *The Approval of the Trinitarian Order* shows Ottomans, including a black, supervising white Christian slaves.





Detail of Paolo Veronese, *Marriage at Cana*, oil, 1563, from S. Giorgio Maggiore, now Louvre, Paris
© ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK; LOUVRE, PARIS

the elderly widow of Duke Alfonso I of Ferrara, Laura Dianti. Titian had portrayed this woman in about 1523, when she was already the Duke's mistress, as attended by a beautiful little African page, and Alfonso's mother, Eleonora of Aragon, had successfully recruited the previously cited family of an Afro-Venetian gondolier as court servants. In the 1560s Laura Dianti was still contributing to the pension of an aging black man who had once served as a military aide to her husband. The story of Othello was thus not only set in Venice, but based in a distant but fundamental way on the lives of Afro-Venetians and their offspring. Two centuries later, as Shakespeare's plays became popular in Italy, the first painted representation of the interracial couple Othello and Desdemona was created by the Venetian artist Francesco Cappella.

By this time, the reader may have begun to wonder about the scarcity of black African women in this essay. Were there no women at all in the hundreds of surviving Venetian images of blacks? Elsewhere in medieval and Renaissance art, black women do play significant roles, although their numbers are considerably smaller than those of black men. In Venetian art, before the 18th century, they are uncommon, though black women certainly lived in the city. Laura Dianti's sister-in-law Isabella d'Este (in Mantua) had three young black maidservants; one of these, and perhaps all three, had been obtained in Venice. Partly to flatter Isabella, the painter Mantegna created a series of drawings and paintings of the Old Testament heroine Judith with (and this was novel) an African maidservant. Eventually, Titian and Veronese adopted this imagery in their pictures of Judith, and Titian also replicated the character of the black maidservant in his *Diana and Actaeon* (an early copy of which is displayed in Fred Wilson's installation). The stark juxtaposition of dark and light skin stressed by this painting and many of the other images here discussed had an appealing piquancy for contemporary viewers. Like certain other Europeans, Venetians sometimes referred to blacks as whites, a rhetorical trick which both emphasizes and complicates notions of physical difference. There were harsher verbal habits, too: by the 1800s, at least, "son of a black mother" was a generic insult in Venetian dialect.

Although in the 19th century Venetian gondoliers believed (or at least told the tourists they guided through the city) that the black Othello had actually existed, and pointed out his dwelling, the figure of the black Venetian general was apparently invented by the courtier and author Giovanni Battista Giraldo Cinthio of Ferrara in a short story published in 1565. Giraldo Cinthio did not use the name Othello, referring to his black military protagonist simply as "the Moor," but in most other respects Shakespeare's play of 1604 depends on this tale. Giraldo Cinthio dedicated this and several other stories in his collection to

The records of the Catecumeni, the Venetian institution charged with converting Jews, Muslims, and pagans to Christianity, along with other archival sources, show that black Africans continued to arrive in Venice in the 1600s and 1700s. The artists of this era tended to repeat, in considerable numbers, the depictions of Magi and servants which had been established during the Renaissance. Tiepolo, who is believed to have had a dark-skinned servant, generated a particularly large and varied set of representations. His frescoes in the ballroom of the Palazzo Labia incorporate nine African figures who denote both the exotic (in scenes of the story of Cleopatra) and the familiar (a black page in Venetian livery set against the illusionistic painted architecture of the room). In the early 1700s, such pages and servants are incorporated in the burgeoning decorative arts of Venice, most famously in a set of partly anthropomorphic furniture by Andrea Brustolon.

The most individualized Venetian images of Africans in the 18th century are three paintings in which black domestic servants serve as the focal point. Pictures by the Longhi (father and son, respectively) represent a dashing black messenger entering a sedate patrician salon, and a charming page in orientaling dress who has the canvas all to himself. But Francesco Guardi's 1770 *Portrait of Lazzaro Zen*, though also an image of a fancily dressed servant in an aristocratic household, is something more. The painting celebrates Zen's conversion to Christianity at the Catecumeni and his adoption as a son by a major patrician family. While the portrait in no sense acknowledges the legitimacy of the culture into which Zen was born, it does acknowledge his individual humanity, and its emphasis on the eligibility of blacks for salvation brings us back toward the Pentecost images from San Marco with which we began.

This survey of Venetian black Africans in art and life has been merely a brief introduction to a broad field. Other selections could have been made from the wealth of images and texts, and more remains to be done in recovering and explaining further visual and written evidence. I have chosen to focus on the complex links between the admiration for and the subordination of black African subjects. Fred Wilson's exhibition at the Biennale, one of the first ambitious meditations on the role of race in Venetian society by a person of African descent, presents its own distinctive views. But as an African American seeking to make sense of Venetian culture, Wilson has one unexpected predecessor. When Mark Twain came to Venice in 1867, the guide who took Twain and his companions to see the artistic sights of the city was a learned and sophisticated Afro-Venetian, the son of South Carolina slaves. We know only a little of what he taught Twain, but perhaps through Wilson's installation we can imagine some of the things he and his forerunners might have said.

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- Pentecost*, cupola mosaic, 12TH century, nave, San Marco
- Martyrdom of St. Mark in Alexandria*, vault mosaic, ca. 1270, Cappella Zen, San Marco
- Creation of Adam*, cupola mosaic, 13TH century, Creation cupola, narthex, San Marco
- Griffin and Black African*, Istrian stone, ca. 1300, south facade, San Marco
- Workshop of Filippo Calendario, *Head of a Black African*, stone, ca. 1340-55, capital #21 from ground-floor arcade of the Palazzo Ducale, now inside in the Museo dell'Opera del Palazzo Ducale
- Drunkenness of Noah*, stone, 14TH century, southeast corner of the Palazzo Ducale
- Wild Men* (so-called "Mori"), bronze, 1499, Torre dell'Orologio
- Workshop of Gian Paolo and Gian Carlo Rainieri, *Adoration of the Magi*, painted wood, 1500 (restored by G. B. Alviero, 1755), Torre dell'Orologio
- Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera, early 1460s, Uffizi, Florence

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- Paolo Veronese, *Feast in the House of Levi*, oil, 1573, from SS. Giovanni e Paolo, now Accademia
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- Baldassare d'Anna, *Approval of the Trinitarian Order*, oil, 1619, S. Maria Formosa
- Paolo Veronese, *Marriage at Cana*, oil, 1563, from S. Giorgio Maggiore, now Louvre, Paris
- Francesco Cappella, *Othello and Desdemona (Geography Lesson)*, oil, ca. 1760, Private Collection, Bergamo
- Andrea Mantegna, *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, drawing, 1491/1492, Uffizi, Florence
- Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, oil, 1559, Collection of Duke of Sutherland on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
- G. B. Tiepolo, *Banquet of Cleopatra* and other scenes, fresco, ca. 1745-23, Palazzo Labia
- Andrea Brustolon, set of furniture for Pietro Venier, wood, ca. 1700-1723, Ca' Rezzonico
- Pietro Longhi, *The Messenger*, oil, 1751, Ca' Rezzonico
- Alessandro Longhi, *The Page*, oil, later 18TH century, Private Collection, Turin
- Francesco Guardi, *Lazzaro Zen*, oil, 1770, from the Catecumeni, now IRE

Interview

Kathleen Goncharov: Let's start by talking a little about your personal history.

Fred Wilson: I was born in the Bronx. My family moved around a lot and we lived in a number of different communities . . . black, Latino, and European immigrant neighborhoods. Originally, we left a West Indian neighborhood in Brooklyn to move to an all-white neighborhood in the suburbs. We lived in the suburbs of New York City until I was twelve years old. This was the 1960s, and it was clear the white community didn't want us there. There were no major outward problems once we moved in, but the bias was very clear. When I went to grade school, I was the only black child; I was rather misunderstood by teachers and I had no friends. We then moved back to the Bronx. During high school we moved back to the suburbs. Growing up as an outsider in the 1960s and early 1970s in all the communities I found myself in, I was always acutely aware of being an observer of the environment around me rather than a participant. I also always had a keen interest, even as a child, in current events, however naive I was about them.

KG: What was your early training in art?

FW: I went to the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. This school was racially and culturally diverse, and I felt quite comfortable there. This was a great time for me to learn to express myself in a variety of art forms. Living in New York City, I took full advantage of the museums there. I was particularly excited by contemporary art and the art of other cultures. I also took classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

KG: You were the only black art student in college, too [at SUNY, Purchase, New York]. What was that like?

FW: Not only was I the only black student, but I was interested in all kinds of "weird" stuff. I studied sculpture and photography, but I was also interested in performance. I studied dance outside of my art training, but it was clear it went hand in hand with sculpture and so I created projects related to sculpture and movement—some rather naive "installation performances." In college no one was doing performance art, but I was interested in it. I studied theatrical lighting, stage makeup, and modern dance. I took courses in archeology and urban design. Also, I was interested in early Italian art, particularly the mosaics in Ravenna. Fortunately I was in a school that was supportive of me and allowed me to experiment, particularly the faculty members Antonio Frascioni, John Cohen, Mel Wong, and Tal Streeter. Streeter was very involved in the avant-garde festivals in New York in the late

1960s to 1980 and I was exposed to the work of contemporary artists of the time such as Robert Smithson, Chuck Close, Vito Acconci, and Yvonne Rainer.

KG: You studied with Robert Morris at Hunter College?

FW: And Tony Smith. I was there only briefly, but they both had their influence. I liked how Morris thought expansively about art; ideas were important. I respected Smith's acumen on formal issues; it made them that important.

KG: What were your early influences artistically?

FW: I was very taken by the Pop artists as a young boy. My major influence, however, was Isamu Noguchi because he had broad interests in sculpture, dance, public art, furniture design, landscape architecture, and urban design. I was also drawn to him because his mixed-race biography, though different from mine, mirrored my own (I am of African, American Indian, European, and Amerindian descent). I was inspired by his use of his personal history in his work.

KG: Did you ever meet him?

FW: That's an interesting story. No, but I talked to him on the telephone. When I was a young artist, one of my first big projects was to create a large environmental sculpture to be sited at Columbus Circle. It was sponsored by New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs. It was a large stepped platform that people could walk and sit on with a face that could only be recognized when viewed from above. I had been traveling in Peru and was inspired by its ancient land art. I had made a number of sculptures where I portrayed the face of a person known and respected throughout the Third World, so in this instance I chose Pope John Paul II. I meant no disrespect, I had made sculptures of many famous people like this, but at the last minute when the archdiocese got wind of it, they nixed it. Sitting on the Pope's face, oh my God. It was clear I'd be hung by my toenails if I did it. So I was faced with the difficult task of changing the face in three days.

It occurred to me that Isamu Noguchi's head was the same shape as the Pope's and would fit the platform that was already built. I revered him, and he'd had trouble with his public art projects too, so I thought he was a very fitting subject. Bess Myerson, who was then the Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs, insisted that I contact him to ask permission. I heard that he was a crotchety old man, but made contact with him through his dealer who had been one of my professors in college. When I called him, I told him the story and he laughed. I asked if I could do it and he told me, "I can't tell you not to do it." I didn't understand so I asked him the same question again. Again, it was the same answer. Ultimately I felt that changing the face would destroy the integrity of the piece, so I didn't change it and at the last minute I put a different sculpture out there instead with the face of Lucille Ball. It was reviewed in the *New York Times* and I always wondered whether Noguchi saw it and wondered what those big red lips had to do with him!

KG: You portrayed the boxer Muhammad Ali also when you did a project with me for Creative Time. Did you meet him?

FW: I did a huge piece of him and I wanted him to see it. I knew people who knew people who

knew him. When I finally made contact, his people asked what I'd pay him to come see it. I was very naive. I just wanted him to see it because I admired him. Then I started to worry what would happen if he did come and didn't like it . . . he is Muhammed Ali after all. That was the last time I ever made a work about a living person [chuckles]. I still don't know if he ever saw it.

KG: It's interesting that your first major works were in the public art arena.

FW: I was particularly interested in "site" as sculpture, which reflected my seminal experiences in West Africa and visits to the ruins of Peru and Egypt. I think I've always been interested in the notion of "the public," but also in the 1970s and 1980s in New York, as a young black artist, the public art and not-for-profit organizations were the only arenas where I could display my work. The world of museums and commercial galleries was tacitly not open to artists of color or those not of European descent. It was an unspoken segregation and this was very upsetting. The whole situation mirrored my childhood experience. I was faced again with a blindness that amounts to bias.

KG: Things in that respect are still not perfect, but obviously a lot has changed. After all, you are representing the U.S. in the Venice Biennale. What are your thoughts on that?

FW: Yes, things have changed, especially for me. However, I don't think I'd be making the work I have been making for the past fifteen years if my early professional experience had been different. Race is not something I'd probably focus on. Even now, it is not race specifically that is my subject. I am acutely aware of people's racial blind spots, but I am most interested in people who are marginal or invisible to the majority, and the larger society's denial of certain issues. That goes way beyond race.

KG: Your project for Venice is about those invisible people. Could you talk about the differences between attitudes in Europe and the United States?

FW: I have always been intrigued by the black characters that appear in European art through the centuries. I grew up in the U.S. with my mother and sister, but my stepmother is Dutch, so I was exposed to European culture when I visited my father's house. I also used to visit the Metropolitan Museum in New York often. When I saw the black characters in the paintings, I would ask myself what their lives were like. They seemed very different from the blacks in early American art. When you asked me to come up with an idea for Venice, I didn't know much about Venetian history, but that question reemerged for me. I always start from a question or a feeling that I want to answer for myself when making my art. This project is like an onion. As I learn more and work in Venice, I have become aware of the many layers of Venetian art and history.

Italy and specifically Venice, which was very cosmopolitan, never had the horrific racial history of the United States. There were other issues that come to bear here. When I look at the images of blacks in Venetian Renaissance art, I see a humanity in the depictions that you would not normally see in early American art. Of course, some of these blacks were visitors from other places but there did seem to be a community here in Venice based on the evidence of the overwhelming number of images in Venetian art. They look quite natural in the paintings, so they had to have been a normal part of the life of the city. I

wanted to understand this, and in doing this project I have begun to see that the Venetian situation in relation to its black community in past centuries was very complex. The fact is that there is no voice—no written documents, biographies, or autobiographies of blacks living in Venice during the Renaissance survive. So there's a gap where no traditional historian can go. But as an artist, I can try to imagine what their lives were like. With my personal background, their experience of being outsiders is one I can comprehend.

I've been asked if I will be presenting the American view or the Venetian view. I hope to present a "moro" view, as best I can. I've been talking to many Venetians and getting a sense of how the historic blacks are perceived. I've heard some people say they were servants and workers and some who say they were slaves. Of course, with the many children who appear as pages and playthings in the paintings, well, I can't imagine they had any say over their young lives, but as far as I can tell, the majority were a vibrant part of the Venetian community. There were those slaves and servants who were brought with visitors from foreign lands, but African visitors did come as soldiers, artisans, and merchants. In Renaissance art there are blacks who are Muslim and blacks who are Christian and there is even a depiction of a black Jew in the Museo Correr. However, in my exhibition I am interested in their commonality of African heritage. There must have been some complex conversations, with the mix of cultures and social status.

KG: It's clear from the art that the Africans depicted in them were thought of as human. You will also be dealing with the stereotyped and insulting images that are ubiquitous around Venice such as the kitsch glass Moors and the lamp stands held by black figures. How do they figure in your exhibition?

FW: I was particularly interested in doing this project about the blacks in the Renaissance because the material predates the Atlantic slave trade. Therefore, you don't see the very biased stereotyped views and ways of thinking about Africans that you see later in America. In my opinion, in the centuries following the Renaissance, during the time of the Atlantic slave trade, images of Africans even in Europe became more stereotyped as "exotica," and I want to make that visible in the exhibition. The only way I understand these issues is through the visual remains . . . the artworks. Look at the decorative art of the 18th and 19th centuries where images of Africans are not individualized. They appear as objects such as doorknobs, lamps, and jewelry. It is a fantasy view of the "Muslim Moor." To me that indicates either a changing attitude, the distancing of the black community and African visitors, or their reduction in number in Venice and Europe at the time.

KG: Could you tell me more about how you work? Especially in relation to your Biennale exhibition?

FW: In general, my projects consist of individual works that make up one artwork. Individual pieces work in consort, sort of like a chess game . . . everything balances with everything else to reveal a larger idea. This project is a combination of specific historical information and art with more complex emotions and abstract ideas. I like the space of the U.S. Pavilion; there are four discrete spaces and the fifth, the atrium, sets the tone and the topic. The chandelier was made in Murano in black glass instead of the usual white or clear

glass, but in the traditional style which appears at the Ca' Rezzonico. The fact that it is not entirely cheerful works well for me. I like the fact that it is beautiful yet not comforting.

If you enter to the left, the majority of the work is about more abstract notions than one specific place or idea. This is where history, words, and intellectual dialogue are not enough to get my feelings across. *Drip, Drop, Plop, Turbulence II*, and the other works are not about any one thing. They are based on specific images and ideas but not only those things. I let my strongest feelings reveal themselves in images that surprise me as well, so I don't like to pin down these works. The viewer's response is valid. Though with *Drip, Drop, Plop*, I particularly saw it as a metaphor for "black tears" when I made it. Because it's the color black, it could be also be seen as related to Africanness. Certainly race was represented visually by Europeans in their art as early as the medieval era. The notion of blackness and whiteness of skin tone was there but more often as a curiosity or a formal device in art than a value judgment. But *Drip, Drop, Plop* could also be seen as a representation of whatever drips that is black . . . oil, tar, ink, etc. Obviously, by placing the eyes on it, I did not simply refer to the black substances, but to the possible metaphor of human degradation through stereotype. Literally, I thought of the body disintegrating into something as debased as drips and spots. Still others have seen this work as sperm and eggs. This is not my interpretation, but I don't discount it.

KG: Tell me about the gallery with the tile room and Othello videos.

FW: *Turbulence II*, the tile room, is more of a state of mind than a place. The noise created by the layering of the Othello operas and plays, the writing in the grout, the large ceramic pot with the bed in it, the optic effect of the tile, and all the other aspects of the room, address my uncertainty about world events. The room is both familiar and foreign, institutional yet private.

My use of Othello videos in *September Dream* was an immediate response to my unrelieved sadness after September 11. It is a fantasy, however futile, about restoring the world to the way it was before the tragedy. Actually, most pieces I've done since then have had aspects relating to the downward spiral of world events.

However, my use of black and white indicates racial relationships as well. These works also relate to the Africans outside of Africa in the early centuries . . . the tile, but also the film clips of Othello and Desdemona. The actors and singers playing Othello are not of African descent, nor are the writers of the story. This work is also about representations of Africans. The various emotions that well up for me are ways I can connect to Africans from other centuries who found themselves, for one reason or another, outside of Africa.

KG: It seems you have chosen to use a different strategy in the galleries to the right of the chandelier.

FW: Yes I have. For the last fifteen years, I have made installations, sculpture, and photographs about museums, which has been the main focus of my art practice. This comes from my experience working in museums and galleries, which eventually dovetailed with my interest in installation and public space, social history, and culture.

Museum environments present many coded messages with their display techniques, and I use them as my palette, my vocabulary. In this exhibition, I use many of the

techniques I have employed in the past . . . faux museum display, re-assembled sculpture, audio emanating from historic paintings, objects in vitrines with cogent labels, display mannequins, and rephotographed images.

In this project I also wanted to connect the historic Africans with the present-day Africans in Venice. I often use the juxtaposition of two images or objects to reveal a third thought. Through photography and other means I hope I accomplished this.

The historic paintings, though not from a museum, are museum quality. Each Renaissance painting has an African in the periphery. I have always asked myself about these characters, and here I have developed questions that hopefully have others asking too. Simply making them visible, and not "a part of the furniture," is satisfying to me. Generally speaking, it is not known exactly who these people are. However, I did find out that, in fact, Tiepolo apparently had an African studio assistant named Ali who appears in some of his paintings. Once you recognize him it is hard not to see him in each painting. It is haunting; he is a distinct person with a story to tell that we will never know.

KG: Thank you, Fred. Your project for the U.S. Pavilion draws on the city of Venice itself as a historical treasure trove. The perspective you bring to the issues of race, identity, history, memory, society, and culture frames a discussion for an international audience at a time when it is critical to understand what it means to be a citizen of the world.



Guarded View, 1991
 Four mannequins with museum
 guard uniforms
 H. of mannequins: 75" (190.5 cm) each
 Whitney Museum of American Art,
 New York

Installation view at *Objects and
 Installations, 1979–2000*, Berkeley Art
 Museum and Pacific Film Archive,
 University of California, Berkeley, 2003
 Photograph: Benjamin Blackwell



Safe Haven, 2003
 Mixed media

Installation view at
 Fosdick-Nelson Gallery,
 Alfred University, Alfred,
 New York

Photograph: Courtesy of the artist
 and Metro Pictures Gallery

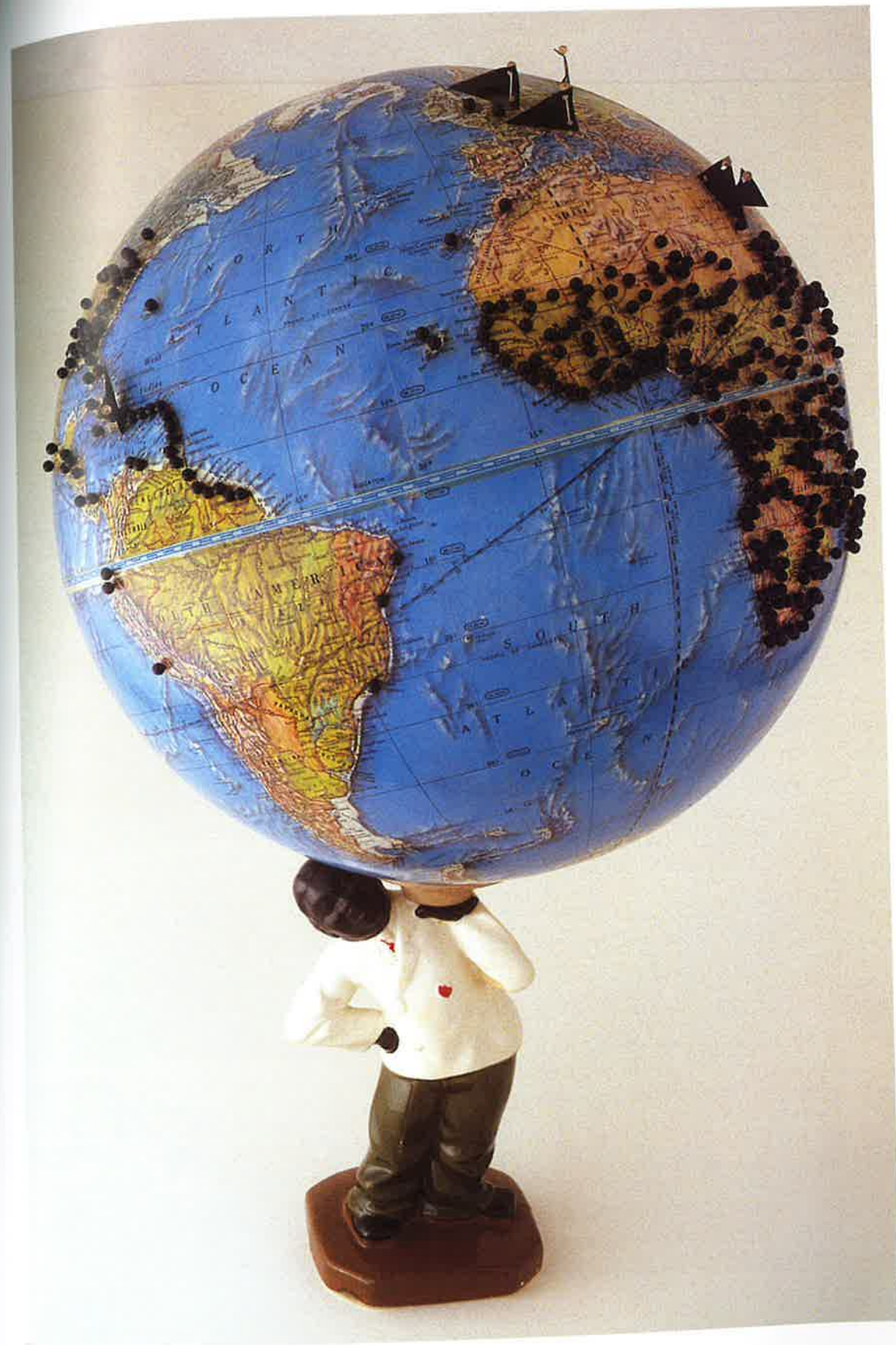


Drip, Drop, Plop, 2001
Glass
Approx. 96" x 60" (243 x 152 cm)
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist
and Metro Pictures Gallery

(OPPOSITE PAGE)
Viewing the Invisible, 1998
Mixed media
Ian Potter Museum of Art,
University of Melbourne, Australia
Detail of installation view at
Ian Potter Museum of Art
Photograph: Fred Wilson



Untitled, 1992
 Plaster, pedestal, books
 66" x 30" x 30" (167.6 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm)
 Denver Art Museum Collection,
 Funds from Alliance for Contemporary
 Art & Colorado Contemporary Collectors
 Photograph: Courtesy of Denver Art Museum



(OPPOSITE PAGE)
Atlas, 1995
 Painted ceramic, globe, pushpins, flags
 20" x 11 1/2" (50.8 x 29.2 cm)
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist
 and Metro Pictures Gallery



*Three Africans from Museum:
Mixed Metaphors, 1993*
Color photographs
16" x 16" (40.6 x 40.6 cm) each
Seattle Art Museum
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist
and Metro Pictures Gallery



Me & It, 1995
Video installation with figures on table
57" x 92" x 44" (144.8 x 233.7 x 117.8 cm)
Photograph: Dan Meyers



Old Salem: A Family of Strangers, 1995
2 from a set of 20 color photographs
20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm) each, edition of 5
Photograph: Dan Meyers



Muzeum Impossible, 1992
Installation view at *Translation*, Center
for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle,
Warsaw, Poland, 1992
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and
Metro Pictures Gallery