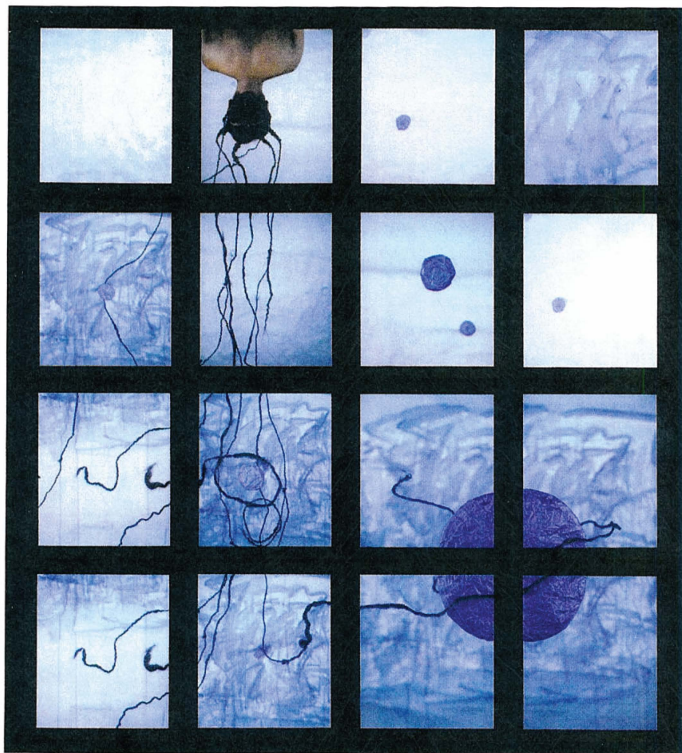


HEW LOCKE  
Sarah Lewis, *The Other Us*, Art in America,  
May 2016, p. 49-52



## BOOKS



Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: *Elevata*, 2002, sixteen Polaroid prints, 96 by 80 inches overall. Courtesy Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

# The Other Us

by Sarah Lewis

KOBENA MERCER

## Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s

Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2016; 384 pages, 111 color illustrations; \$104.95 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

Can one fully understand modern and contemporary art without studying the black diaspora? Kobena Mercer's *Travel & See* offers an unequivocal "no" to this rarely asked question. In the introduction to this collection of analytic pieces written between 1992 and 2012, the British-born Mercer—currently professor of art history and African American studies at Yale University—argues that black artistic practices have irrevocably shaped our entire sense of "what art actively *does* as it enters into the circulatory networks of public life."

Attention to race in art history often restricts any discussion of aesthetics, the author observes, and this tends to rob globally dispersed black art of its dialogic power. It is an argument he has made before, now reiterated and clarified with great force. "My [earlier] view that 'the dignity of

objecthood is very rarely bestowed on the diaspora's works of art' . . . was not a call to switch from person-centered or context-centered to object-centered approaches," Mercer writes, "but to plunge into the multicentric circuits through which works of art acquire universality as they travel across the imaginative realms of great time." *Travel & See* examines those circuits in eighteen chapters previously published as reviews, essays, or critical articles.

Mercer, well known for his 1994 book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, here assesses the wide-ranging effects of the "interruptive agency of blackness"—for example, artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's focus on deep-seated African and Chinese influences in Cuban culture—in uncovering the "interdependence buried at the foundations of the modern discourse of aesthetics," an interdependence that goes far beyond Picasso's 1907 epiphany in the Trocadéro or the formal "affinities" highlighted in MoMA's survey "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" (1984–85). One of the main contributions of Mercer's new volume is the way it details the myriad links between

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## Mercer toggles back and forth between scrutinizing specific artists' disruptive strategies and a broader focus on social issues.

Chris Ofili: *Double Captain Sbit and the Legend of the Black Stars*, 1997, acrylic, oil, polyester resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung on linen, 96 by 72 inches. Courtesy Victoria Miro, London.

black diasporic artworks, events, and scholarship and the pre-histories of contemporary art (a much-needed development, as Terry Smith, author of *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 2009, noted in "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art" in the *Art Bulletin*, December 2010).

Using a dual critical framework, Mercer toggles back and forth between scrutinizing specific disruptive strategies—through close readings of the work of figures like Chris Ofili, Kara Walker, and Kerry James Marshall as well as less widely known artists like Keith Piper and Hew Locke—and a broader focus on the political climate and the social order. Mercer's book thus exemplifies the dialogic approach that he believes is essential for grasping the mutually constitutive function of black diasporic art and modernism.

*Travel & See* benefits from a retrospective gaze; Mercer's 30-year career gives him a judicious distance on some highly charged aesthetic movements and issues (e.g., Afro-Futurism, Black Power, African American feminism), as he transitions from examining themes—identity politics, the backlash against a "post-black" discourse—to considering the



larger dynamics of the black diaspora since the 1980s, when post-essentialist issues of race and representation emerged insistently in the art world. The book is divided into five sections (focusing on representation, cultural difference, multiple modernities, global dispersion, and the psychology of displacement and postcolonialism), while the synoptic introduction has a coherence that helps readers follow the progressive shifts in the essays.

Mercer notes how prescient comments by the path-breaking Yale University professor Robert Farris Thompson anticipated aspects of his own work. Thompson—who has charted the influence of African culture on art in the Americas and who coined the terms "Black Atlantic" and "Afro-modernism"—has advocated a "retelling of Modernism to show how it . . . reveal[s] that 'the Other' is your neighbor—that black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago."<sup>1</sup> This is an important theoretical inclusion. Having relied heavily on Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin in his prior scholarship, Mercer (while spilling less ink in the process) now sets Thompson in his rightful place at the center of this argument, offering what amounts to an homage to Thompson's visionary perspective. In one of many instances, Mercer cites Thompson when discussing the Yoruba aesthetics manifest in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), a Nigerian-born artist who studied in London and New York. Fani-Kayode's work is frequently—and somewhat superficially, the author shows—associated with that of his friend Robert Mapplethorpe. Mercer instead uses the African photographer's images as a case study in the precise form of world-making that Thompson long ago argued a careful look at aesthetics could provide.

Hew Locke: *Black Queen*, 2014, wood, screws, plastic, and fabric, 9½ by 5¼ by 2 feet. Courtesy Hales, London and New York. Photo Thierry Bal.

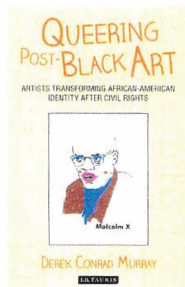


Mercer once saw the proverbial phrase TRAVEL & SEE inscribed on a boat in Ghana, and by the end of the book (whose last section is called “Journeying”) it is clear that he is making a case for the power of seeing to elicit travel, at least of a mental sort—the movement of ideas across space, time, and diverse cultures, shaping the contours of contemporary art globally. Will Mercer’s argument engender scholarship outside of his own fields of expertise? Will it prompt art historians to consider what the material history of the Black Atlantic world—its centuries-long trade in products, peoples, and concepts—says about the

braided origins of modernism? These are the high stakes of Mercer’s volume. It does not simply collect his past writings; it forces us to see international modernism in a way that has implications for future scholarship both within and beyond the field of black diasporic art. *Travel & See* posits Mercer as a chronicler not only of the field of contemporary art of the Afro-modern world, but of the inextricable ties of black diasporic art and modernism itself. ○

1. Robert Farris Thompson, “Afro-Modernism,” *Artforum*, December 1991, p. 91

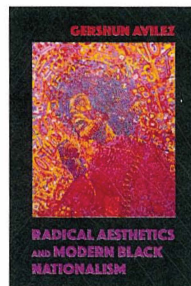
## Books in Brief



DEREK CONRAD MURRAY  
**Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights**

Examining work by contemporary artists like Glenn Ligon, Kalup Linzy, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley, University of California Santa Cruz professor Derek Conrad Murray considers the development of a “post-black” aesthetic—and expanding cultural identity—in tandem with the rise of female and LGBTQ African American artists.

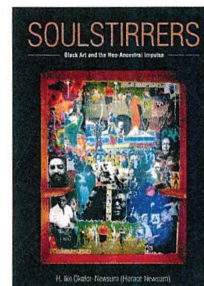
London, I.B. Tauris, 2015, 256 pages, 41 black-and-white integrated illustrations, 8 color plates; \$27 paperback.



GERSHUN AVILEZ  
**Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism**

How did the Black Arts Movements impact African American culture of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s? Historian Gershun Avilez examines this period of terrific social upheaval, detailing how artistic practices paired with aspects of the Black Power movement to forge an “aesthetic radicalism.”

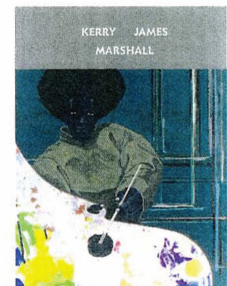
Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2016, 224 pages, 8 black-and-white photographs; \$95 hardcover.



H. IKE OKAFOR-NESUM  
**SoulStirrers: Black Art and the Neo-Ancestral Impulse**

Artist and scholar H. Ike Okafor-Nesum documents the mid-twentieth-century beginnings of the Cincinnati-based Neo-Ancestral impulse, which endeavored to recuperate so-called “primitive” black and African motifs, frequently exploited by white artists. Connecting this effort to the preceding Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, and Black Arts Movements, Okafor-Nesum identifies the melding of the sacred and profane as a central feature of African aesthetics, both in the US and the African diaspora at large.

Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, 174 pages, 137 color illustrations; \$65 hardcover.



ELIZABETH ALEXANDER  
IAN ALTEVEER, HELEN  
MOLESWORTH, DIETER  
ROELSTRAETE, and  
ABIGAIL WINOGRAD  
**Kerry James Marshall: Master**

Accompanying a major traveling retrospective of the same name, now at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, this monographic catalogue features essays by curators as well as the artist, whose figurative paintings chronicle the African American experience in a range of pictorial genre such as history painting, portraiture, and landscape.

New York, Skira Rizzoli, 2016, 288 pages, 140 color illustrations; \$65 hardcover.