

BUFFALO RISING

The Language of Objects



by Dana Tyrrell July 22, 2017, 6:35 pm

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How are we to interpret an object of artistic and cultural significance when it is thousands of miles, and many decades removed from its source? This becomes the central question facing anthropologists, art historians, and curators alike when examining the objects which are part and parcel of the archaeological and ethnographic Cravens World Collection at the University at Buffalo's Anderson Gallery. It is also the question from which their newest exhibit, *The Language of Objects*, emerged. The exhibit seeks, and succeeds in, creating new additions to the complex lives of cultural objects and forges new, synaptic pathways between cultural objects and the work of contemporary artists Matthew Craven, Brendan Fernandes, and Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz.

Brandon Fernandes' work is the first encountered within the gallery space in the form of Congolese masks sitting atop pedestals, whose 3-D printed twins hang from curved metal arms dropping from each corresponding plinth. The printed masks are stark white, removing them from any visual assumptions toward being an artifact, instead they are high artifice. These digitally realized reproductions speak to the central premise of the exhibit, which is finding new ways to append contemporary art and visual culture to de-contextualized cultural objects. Fernandes' most striking body of work within the exhibit is instead his photographs of the underside, or face-side, of the masks from the Craven's World Collection; *Insiders I-IX*. These photographs, all approximately life-sized and installed at varying heights, each sitting along the range for a potential viewer's face. By this I mean, if a viewer were to look headlong into one of these photographs, they could approximate how it must have felt to wear one of these masks, whose purposes were high ceremony and ritual. Through the implication of Western eyes and bodies in this manner, the work in the exhibit not only begins to add to the lives of these cultural objects, but also begins to narrow the gap of possibility and understanding between vastly different cultures.

Matthew Craven's work immediately digs into the central question of this exhibit; how can we interpret or translate the visual language of another group (or groups) of people that existed long before us, and apart from us? His most pressing series populates found paper with found images that are arrayed in such a way as their constellation might imply language. Resembling hieroglyphics, images of cultural objects (bowls, vessels,

sculpted torsos, stone weaponry, and so forth) are doubled and repeated within each frame of this series, whose effect is to not only investigate the viewers semiotic entanglement with language, but to instigate and agitate a new, closed *lingua franca* that exists only within the parameters of the art itself.

Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz rounds out the triumvirate of contemporary artists working in this exhibit. Compared to the work of the other artists within this exhibit, Mumtaz's work is unassumingly forward and hyper flat. What draws you in most of all is her *Traveller* series, which deploys dyed, handmade paper collage across hand-woven silk. These collaged parts and their constituent paragraphs of silk are then hung flat against the gallery's walls, calling to mind Byzantine tapestries, Moroccan flat weave, and cyanotypes, in turn. The ritualized and serialized bodies imagined by Mumtaz are largely feminine in their expression, full of presence and purpose; their creation belies an artist's hand which seeks to move the bodies of women from what are traditionally places of cultural production to moments of worshipful awe and reverence.

Curators Rachel Adams and Robert Scalise succeed throughout *The Language of Objects*; with measured curatorial pacing across the Anderson Gallery's expansive first and second floors, through working with artists whose practices arc seamlessly along the function and aesthetics of the Craven's World Collection, and by engaging with a collection of beautiful and difficult cultural objects – whose past exhibitions can feel rote – and in the end carving an invigorating space between antiquity and contemporaneity. *The Language of Objects* is on view now through July 30, 2017 at the Anderson Gallery, 1 Martha Jackson Place, Buffalo, New York. Hours and availability can be found at www.ubartgalleries.org



Matthew Craven;
Crossed, 2017 found
image on found paper;
28 x 22 inches.