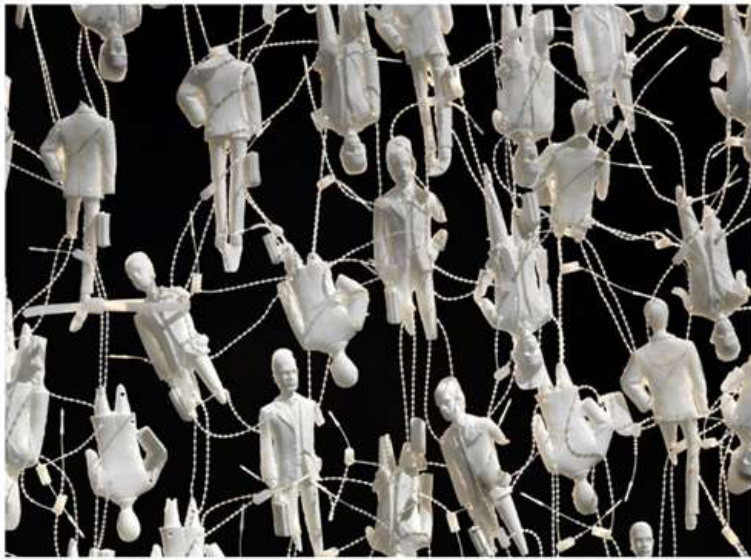


the PARIS REVIEW

White Man on a Pedestal

By Toniann Fernandez November 29, 2017

ARTS & CULTURE



KENYA (ROBINSON), IV / WEEI KING, 2017.

The fourth statue of J. Marion Sims was erected at Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, on November 10. The other three monuments to Sims—which live in New York’s Central Park; in Montgomery, Alabama; and in Columbia, South Carolina—celebrate the “Father of Modern Gynecology,” the man who developed the surgical technique for the repair of the vesicovaginal fistula, an injury often encountered during childbirth. This recently erected statue, however, is dedicated to the atrocities Sims committed: to the black women he tortured through bloody, nonconsensual, and nontherapeutic surgeries without anesthetics. His new plinth reads PONEROS, Greek for “Evil One.” To his right, is a gang of ten thousand five-inch-tall, plastic white men (cumulatively, they are eighteen feet tall) referred to by their maker as “Daves.” Both are part of Doreen Garner and Kenya (Robinson)’s exhibition “White Man on a Pedestal (WMOAP),” which seeks to amend history without erasing it. It’s a clarion call for reorienting our perspective. The exhibition asks viewers to consider white privilege as a plastic toy and to evaluate their own complicity in its proliferation.



DOREEN GARNER, PONEPOS, 2017. INSTALLATION VIEW, PIONEER WORKS, RED HOOK, NEW YORK.

man that stands in Central Park today. He is painted in blood-red polyurethane.

I spoke with Aisha Awadallah, an artist, a friend of Garner’s, and one of the artist’s models for *Rack of those Ravaged and Unconsenting*. “The beauty in Garner’s work gives it an aspect of empowerment and resilience,” she said. “The jewels, pearls, and rhinestones speak to a brilliant

strength and power in our culture that persists despite the horrors of our history.” On November 30, Garner will perform her own experimental surgery on *The Skin of Poneros*, a silicon form peeled from her Sims, then stuffed, stapled and set in a coffin flanked by red fluorescent lights. This surgery, like most of Sims’s real surgeries, will be a public performance, allowing the artist to flip the script. The performance is titled *Purge*.

During Sims’s tenure as a plantation physician in Montgomery, Alabama, from 1845 to 1849, Sims conducted experimental gynecological operations on ten enslaved women of African descent. Only three of their names were recorded: Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy. Anarcha underwent public vesicovaginal fistula surgery at Sims’s hand thirty times without anesthesia before Sims perfected his craft. She was repeatedly sliced open and stitched up. Sims claimed that she and his other subjects *wanted* to be healed, but as the historian Vanessa Gamble responded in a [2016 interview on NPR’s Hidden Brain](#), of course he did. His claim “mutes the story of slavery in his work, mutes that the foundations of gynecology are based on the pain of enslaved and black women.” Viewed through this lens, surgical tools become instruments of brutality and the flesh of the women, represented in the exhibition by the masses on the meat rack, are symbolic of the commodification of the black body. These women were viewed as inhuman objects both before and after their experience with Sims. In 1850, when the doctor was through experimenting, he left the plantation for New York City, where he gained a reputation as a skilled surgeon. His subjects were essentially left for dead.



DOREEN GARNER, RACK OF THOSE RAVAGED AND UNCONSENTING, 2017. INSTALLATION VIEW, PIONEER WORKS, RED HOOK, NEW YORK.

Garner speaks of her work as being in conversation with that of Harriet Washington, the author of *Medical Apartheid*. In her book, Washington gives the account of a fifteen-year-old enslaved girl who became the victim of W. H. Robert, a physician and instructor in Georgia. When the girl was brought to him with a minor injury, he decided to amputate her leg for his class. The surgeon told his students that amputation should be considered according to race and class, and had administered the amputation not because it was necessary but in order to teach a lesson to his students. This is the story that inspired Garner’s *A Fifteen Year Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again; A White Man In Pursuit of the Pedestal*: a silicon, bloodied leg inlaid with beads and Swarovski crystals atop a rotating, metal operating table whose presentation conjures images of a car for sale at a dealership.

And if you think nonconsensual experimentation ended in the 1800s, you’re wrong. Washington writes about hospitals in Detroit that, in recent years, have been “quietly experimenting” by giving commercial blood to unconscious ER patients who cannot give consent.

On the topic of white privilege, artist Kenya (Robinson) states that "the only reason why it works is because the majority of the planet in some way subscribes to it. Because we all believe it a little bit, it feels monumental." In (Robinson)'s astounding conceptual sculpture *Twelve Thousand Maniacs!* she has created an eighteen-foot-tall monolith atop which walk twelve thousand five-inch-tall, white, suit-wearing, briefcase-carrying men. They are all named Dave Fowler. They are indistinguishable from each other and profoundly unexceptional. They are, according to (Robinson), "a miniature representation of the absurdity of homogeneity in spaces of power." They are "white privilege, actual size."



DEVIN GARNER, *A FIFTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL WHO WOULD NEVER DANCE AGAIN: A WHITE MAN IN PURSUIT OF THE PEDESTAL*, 2017, INSTALLATION VIEW, PIONEER WORKS, RED HOOK, NEW YORK.



KENYA (ROBINSON), *TWELVE THOUSAND MANIACS!*, 2017, INSTALLATION VIEW, PIONEER WORKS, RED HOOK, NEW YORK.

Dave, or #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET is a fetish object of the sort used in the traditional sympathetic magic of West African spiritual-cultural practices. This meager form, mass produced at a factory in China, communicates that we as individuals are larger than these toxic concepts, which gain their strength from a small part of each of us. If each of the twelve thousand Daves were pocketed by individuals, an act symbolizing an unsubscription to the myth of white male superiority, the monument would disappear. (Robinson) has carried a mini Dave Fowler with her since 2013 (hence the title #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET).

On the monument's verso is the Daves' funeral altar: candles in the shape of the #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET burn in glass vessels of varied carbonized opacity atop golden doilies and astroturf that imitates something real but is in fact fake. The Daves will ultimately be buried by the artist in an undisclosed location. Before this, on December 17, a formal funeral service will be held at Pioneer Works. The funeral will be a party complete with a New Orleans-style brass band.



KENYA (ROBINSON), *ALTER*, 2017.

The word SHARE is carved into the back of each Dave. It is a nod to the artists' belief that "all white people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religious affiliation or class, essentially share in the benefits of white supremacy." Perhaps we are meant to think of a stock market share. Ultimately, SHARE seems to be a direct request from the artist to the viewer to literally share, as in on social media.

Social media is a crucial platform for the propagation of the images and ideas and, in acknowledgement of this, many of (Robinson)'s works feature hashtags in their titles. Social media also provides an opportunity to reach a younger audience, which is part of what motivated (Robinson) to create an augmented reality piece titled *Bebe's Kids*. The experience, facilitated by two teenage docents, is viewed on an iPad. Large, virtual Dave Fowlers are conjured on-screen in pools of light visible throughout the exhibition. When you touch the screen to "kill" Dave, he bursts into hundreds of tiny Daves. The catchphrase of the original *Bebe's Kids*, the 1992 animated film created by Robin Harris, is: "We don't die, we multiply."

The inclusion of an augmented reality piece, (Robinson) says, is related to the scarcity created by institutions: "If I can't have the space I need, I'll create it." Both Garner and (Robinson) think of space as material, and could readily recall times they were passed over by institutions for white men who were objectively less qualified. Garner likened this experience to the 2016 election: "If you try to take that on as an individual, it is a lot more psychically damaging than if you do it with an ally or a friend that shares the same experience." The two met at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2014 where #WMOAP was first conceived.

Garner and (Robinson) are currently collaborating on a publication to follow the exhibition. It will feature new essays by Claudia Rankine, Emily Nussbaum, and Tavia Nyong'o, among others, alongside conversations between Garner and (Robinson) and M. Lamar, Sanford Biggers, and Harriet A. Washington. In the words of the artists, "The exhibition will serve as a catalyst for a sweeping anthology of new texts, canonical reprints, archival material, and discussions around white privilege in popular culture and art, slated for print with Pioneer Works Press in spring 2018."

White Man on a Pedestal is not a request for the removal of any statue. At the conclusion her interview with NPR, Vanessa Gamble is asked if she thinks the statue of Sims should be taken down. She responds, "No." Instead, Gamble says, "Something needs to be done to commemorate the women, to add something that says, Yes, Sims did this, but what about Anarcha? What about Lucy? What about Betsey? I think if we don't do that, that people will forget what happened to those women." A commission appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio to review New York City's "symbols of hate" is currently deliberating whether the statue of Sims should remain. Perhaps they should consider commissioning a few new pieces from Garner and (Robinson) instead.

White Man on a Pedestal (WMOAP) will be at Pioneer Works from November 10 through December 17.

Toniann Fernandez is a writer based in New York City.