Cultural Daily

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Raymond Saunders: Seen and Unseen

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> In the process of painting, for the one thing that someone sees, there are innumerable things that they never see – Raymond Saunders

Reminiscent of Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Raymond Saunders' thematic paintings have remained unclassifiable and singular. Raymond Saunders has been an important presence in American Contemporary Art for over 50 years. His famous painting of Jack Johnson (1972, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art) was used as the cover of Powell's Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century. Saunders is the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, the Prix de Rome, and the National Endowment for the Arts Award. We caught up with the artist in the midst of his current exhibition.

Cultural Weekly: You are currently in your 10th solo exhibition with Lora Schlesinger Gallery featuring your 'Recent Works' on view until October 17 . What can viewers expect to see?

Raymond Saunders: Viewers can expect to see an explosion of paintings and assemblage. It includes pieces that are edgy, sculptural and conceptual. Lora had come to my place to select works for the show. After having seen her selections, I decided that she needed to include one major sculptural piece nicknamed "No Parking." "No Parking" takes from the streets a weathered wooden pallet and objects, one wouldn't expect to hang on their wall. It's an extension of the painted portion that fuses natural elements like flowers with architectural elements. When I told Lora to take the piece for the show, she looked alarmed because of the size and the rawness of the work.

She agreed to take the piece after I insisted, and "No Parking" really gives the show an unexpected and distinctive edge.

CW: Your work is often noted to convey messages about your experiences as an African American artist. How do you translate your experiences into your paintings? Are you also inspired by Asian culture?

RS: My work is often associated with my experiences as a black artist, but since the 1960's I have been saying "Black is a color". I am an Artist. I do not believe that art work should be limited or categorized by one's racial background. I take elements from my surroundings, mostly small bits

of paper and things that I find interesting like old paint palettes, stiff paintbrushes and elements that add texture to the work. The found bits and pieces appeal to the public and are familiar elements that adds moments of narrative to the work. Working with black is different than working on a white surface. The white surface you have to fill in, and on the black I put anything down and it fills itself. Because I love black as a color, I can make it sing with just placing something in the right place. On a white canvas the thing can fall down or has to be supported, because it's empty. It's not a presence.

CW: What commentary are you making about politics and race in your work?

RS: Black is a color. Racial hang-ups are extraneous to art. No artist can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art–the living root and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human spiritual and intellectual experience. Can't we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?

CW: You use a lot of castaway and found objects, how did this transpire?

RS: What is your process for choosing pieces to use for your works? I pick up what I like and I keep it handy, until I find a good place for it in a work. I have a nice collection of images and objects, that are constantly in flux.

CW: What is next for you as an artist?

RS: Make more art.

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