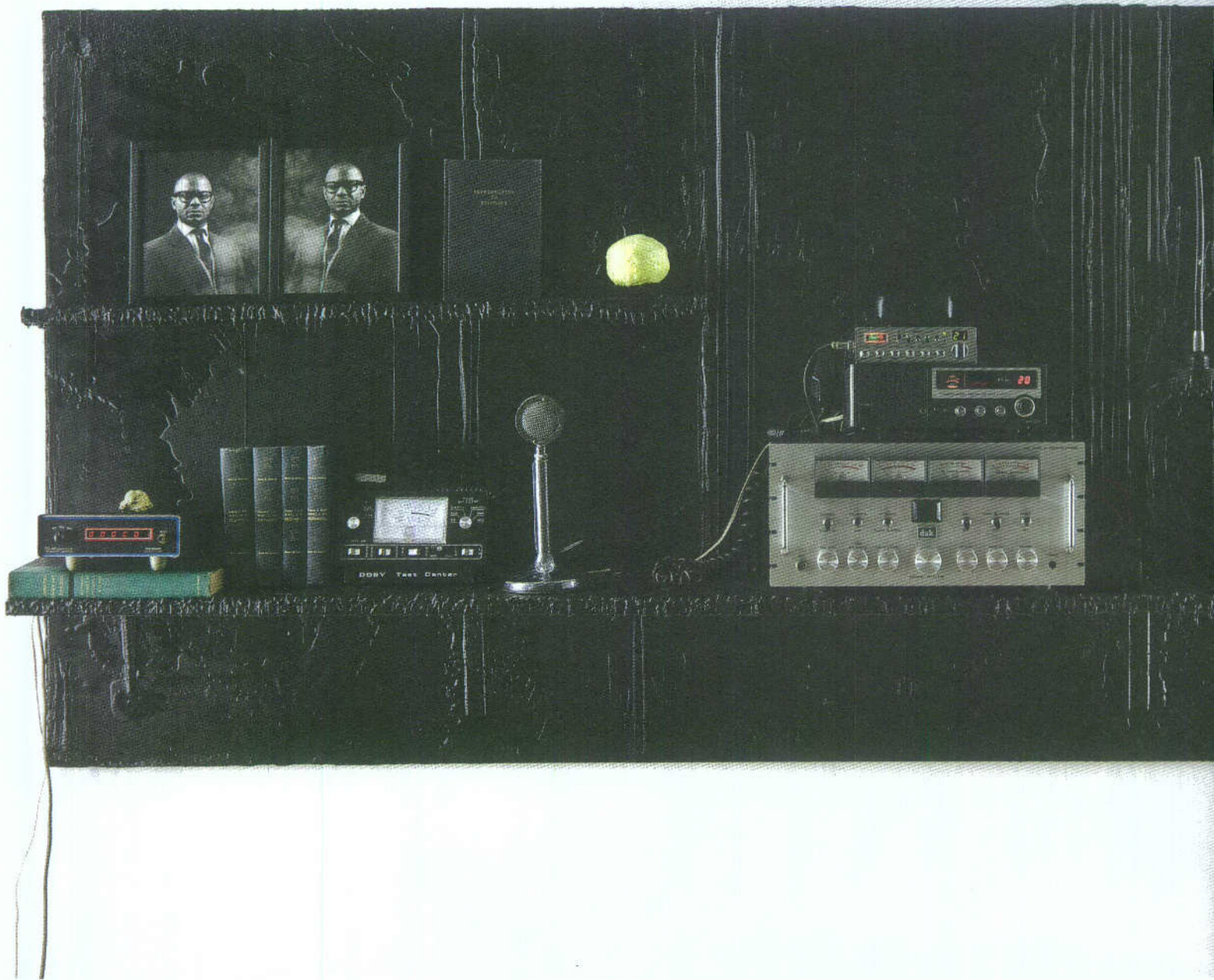


REVIEWS:
| USA |



Citizen Band (Explorations in Topology),
2008, wax, soap, shea butter, framed
photographs and mixed media on fibreboard,
122 x 244 x 31 cm. Courtesy Rubell Family
Collection, Miami

30 Americans

Towards the end of his catalogue essay for *30 Americans*, 'Looking B(l)ack: Reflections of White Racism', Robert Hobbs lists various racial 'inequities' (compiled by Sally Lehrman, a reporter and fellow with the University of Southern California's Institute for Justice and Journalism). And though the list begins in the realm of economics – as a percentage, two times more blacks than whites hold low-paying jobs or are unemployed; blacks are denied mortgages more often than whites – it quickly enters the realm of death and dismemberment – cancer death rates, as compared to whites, are as much as 90 to 100 times more 'accelerated' for blacks; mortality rates from stroke and heart disease are greater for blacks than for whites; due to inadequate treatment for diabetes and hypertension, blacks receive lower-limb amputations in greater numbers than whites...

The picture painted here offers a demonstration of how racism registered at the abstract level of economics can become concrete, in a most pernicious and invasive way, when registered at the level of lives and bodies. It makes sense, then, that bodies are what most of the 31 artists in *30 Americans* concern themselves with, considering that all of these Americans are of African descent – which is to say, they are all black – and so that embattled category race, and its malignant derivative racism, are the horizons from which none of them can escape.

This is not to say that some haven't tried. In his at times humorous and at times blistering *abécédaire* (*Untitled*, 2008) that opens the same catalogue, Glenn Ligon more than once confesses to his indulgence in the fantasy world of *Star Trek* and a certain fascination with its Vulcan characters, for whom logic reigns and emotion is absent. Race is after all an emotional category; it matters not that Spock is white, or that another Vulcan from one of the many television spin-offs, Tuvok, is black – logic is rightly colour-blind. And both this blindness and the harsh light that logic can shine pervade Ligon's work. In the word-paintings included in *30 Americans*, Ligon claws at the weak threads of clichéd African American identity quests. *Gold Nobody Knew Me #1* (2007) reproduces bits from Richard Pryor's stand-up routines ("I went to Africa. I went to the Mother land to find my roots! right? Seven hundred million black people! Not one of those motherfuckers knew me"), while only a few words of *Mirror #7* (2006), in contrast, are legible through the layers of Ligon's signature oil-stick surfaces. If there is a reflection in this last, it is as opaque as one's skin.

Skin, of course, is the great bodily analogue here. Rodney McMillian's idiosyncratic assemblage of black vinyl (*Untitled*, 2007) and installation of filthy carpet (*Carpet*, 2005) animate those materials that not only cover so much of our everyday world but also receive the brunt of our interactions with it. Rashid Johnson's pieces work in the opposite direction. As opposed to giving us the side that faces the world, Johnson's shelving displays, engulfed in layers of black wax and soap, hint at the kind of mind that might lie on the other side of one's outward appearance – for example, *Citizen Band (Explorations in Topology)* (2008) displays a variety of radio equipment and books on mathematics and topology (the field, we could note, chosen by W.S. Claytor, who in 1933 became only the third African American to receive a PhD in mathematics).

It would be foolish to push this analogy too far, however. While certainly dealing with questions of surface, both McMillian's and Johnson's works, not to mention Leonardo Drew's stacks of cotton and wax (*Untitled #25*, 1992), Gary Simmons's *Erasure Series* (various dates) and Mark Bradford's collage excavation (*Whore in the Church House*, 2006) exceed the kind of legibility that the trope of skin alone might provide.

Nevertheless, bodies remain the order of the day in *30 Americans*, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the juxtaposition of Carrie Mae Weems's iconic photographic series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–6) and Hank Willis Thomas's *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008* (2005–8). Where Weems – in photographs of blacks from slave-era America overlaid with such declaratives as 'You became a scientific profile/an anthropological debate/a negroid type/& a photographic subject' – explores the history of how black bodies became subject to regimes of discourse, Thomas looks at how those bodies became subject to a new regime, one now largely commercial and corporate in nature, through the alteration of ads he culled from *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines.

The thing to note here, of course, is that the bodies Weems singles out were in many ways never considered her subjects' own, whereas what Thomas's ads exploit is exactly the conditions of self-possession whereby someone decides what kind of person they want to be through the kinds of things they decide to buy. The two might equally depict forms of subjection, but the subjects involved in each are different in kind. Weems's subjects are 'scientific profiles' and 'anthropological debates' because they are black; Thomas's subjects are black because they have become vehicles of commodified desire. And according to the logic of the latter – which is to say, the logic of capitalism – 'race' becomes once again nothing more than a subject of economics.

Jonathan T.D. Neil



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: 30 Americans
SOURCE: Art Rev no30 Mr 2009

Copyright Art Review, Ltd. USA and Canadian subscription to Art Review are handled by agents: International Media Service, 3330 Pacific Ave., Ste. 404, Virginia Beach, VA 23451, 800-428-3003. Annual subscription price \$79, Canada \$85. Our Internet address is <http://www.art-review.co.uk>