



Black Dolls, from the collection of Deborah Neff

curator: Nora Philippe

consultant: Deborah Willis

exhibition from February 23rd to May 20th 2018

PLEASE RETURN
TO THE FRONT DESK

***You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise [...]***

* Maya Angelou, in : "Still I Rise"

THE COLLECTION OF DEBORAH NEFF

Since its creation, La maison rouge has shown private collections. *Black Dolls* is the last ever exhibition in this series. It springs from a meeting between Nora Philippe, a French author, film-maker and teacher, and Deborah Neff, an American collector of black dolls. Nora Philippe was immediately convinced of the need to show these dolls in Europe and open up a new field of research. This is not just an academic and artistic endeavour; it also has the political ambition to give a voice to the women who made sentient objects (these dolls), precisely in reaction to the objectification imposed on them. Some twenty years ago, while browsing at an antiques fair in Atlanta, Deborah Neff came across a handmade black doll, and was taken aback by its beauty, dignity and singularity. Her collection now represents more than a thousand dolls, together with works by self-taught contemporary artists, including Nellie Mae Rowe, and remarkable textile creations such as quilts, possibly sewn by the very same women who made these African-American dolls. Over the past decade, Deborah Neff has also assembled an archive of period photographs which she uses to document her dolls and unlock their history: who made them and where; in what context were they made; who were the boys and girls who owned them, and what society and social relations do they reproduce or represent?

A DISTINCT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Little is known about these black dolls. Materials, techniques and certain stylistic properties, particularly the clothes in which they are dressed, enable us to form hypotheses, some supported by narratives or personal records. Passed down between generations, they have been patched and darned, or new elements added, which makes it difficult to attribute or date them with any kind of precision. We do know that these two hundred or so dolls were made between 1840 and 1940, and that they must be considered within this particular context. Indeed, many of these dolls came about in a period when the United States was divided between the North where slavery had, theoretically, been abolished, and the South where it was still in force. In 1860, 90% of the four million men, women and children classified as "Black" were reduced to slavery. While the end of the American Civil War in 1865 gave African-Americans legal freedom, the Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in the South; (these laws took their name from a minstrel song, Jump Jim Crow, that was performed in blackface. "Jim Crow" later became a pejorative name for Blacks. The Jim Crow laws were not repealed until the enactment of the Civil Rights Act in 1964). While

segregation was instated by law in the South, de facto segregation existed in the North as Blacks were discriminated against in employment, housing and education. In the early twentieth century, migration towards the North and the emergence of Black urban communities led to greater socio-economic plurality. Most of these dolls, probably made between 1890 and 1910, reflect this cultural and social diversification.

THE VOICES OF THESE UNKNOWN CREATORS

The names of the women who made these dolls – and we can assume that they were women as sewing was, at that time, the work of women and girls – are lost to us. For a seamstress to sign or dedicate her doll would mean she had the right to do so - or that she had taken that liberty. Although an important means for creative expression, as well as a form of political resistance (something certain of the dolls make abundantly clear, particularly the five which the curator has set apart in the small central gallery), the vast majority of these dolls were first and foremost everyday objects, made as toys for children. Throughout the exhibition, we are reminded of the African-American women who fought for their rights. Their memory and their words accompany us, inscribed on the gallery walls alongside those of the great Black thinkers and reformers such as Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) and, of course, contemporary black feminist activists: indeed, the exhibition opens with a quote from Alice Walker (b. 1944). For let us not forget that black feminism in the United States is historically linked to the abolitionist movements of the early twentieth century.

CHILDHOOD, AND THE ROLE OF DOLLS

Dolls have existed for thousands of years in almost every culture (in certain contexts, dolls are used in rituals or magic, which is not the case here). A doll is always an important medium for mental projection and a source of valuable information for the social sciences. A doll tells us about a society; what that society is and the message it gives its children. Toys are, generally, an expression of the cultures in which they are made and used. What, then, of the doll, the ultimate anthropomorphic toy? In 2015, the American critic and journalist Margo Jefferson (b. 1947) asked "who are you playing with when you play with, live with, a doll of another race?" A toy/doll is a transitional object, a concept introduced by the English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), meaning it exists not in itself but for the child's action toward it (care for, punish, even harm it) - which can only confirm the importance for a child to

have dolls that look like her or him. The Doll Test, an experiment conducted in the United States in the 1940s by Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, shows the extent to which racism and interiorised racism take shape in the relationship between child and doll. For the purpose of the test, African-American children were shown two dolls, one black and one white, and asked which was nicest, which did they like best, which would they like to play with, etc. In the 1940s, and again in 2005, an overwhelming majority of these black children preferred the white doll.

DOLLS AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

As a transitional object, the doll also plays a role in the mother-child bond. This can be a mimetic role, enabling self-construction, or as a substitute enabling separation. The dolls shown in the main gallery on the right represent many different and individualised types that are far removed from the archetypes of mothering (baby doll) or the objectified female (fashion doll). Furthermore, these handmade black dolls are astonishingly diverse in their representations of women, but more so skin colour, with an infinite and nuanced palette of hues. All ages are shown, as well as various professions, different social markers and interpersonal relations. Each doll has its own character, like a portrait. The care devoted to crafting their features and expressions goes against every stereotype (remember that this was the age of blackface and minstrel shows in the United States). This essential notion of care appears throughout the collection and, more widely, in the reflections of the women and men who, since the nineteenth century and to the present day, imagine and create these black dolls. Certain details of both the dolls and the other works on show, particularly the quilts, suggest a further area for research, namely how these objects relate to African diaspora history and to the creations that were brought to the United States by the women and men who were captured and sold as slaves (note the recurrence of the colour red, suggestions of African statuary, the importance of textile arts, and dissymmetry as a protection against the evil eye).

IMAGES, AND SELF-IMAGE

The representation of the family and its unique bonds is also important when (re)constructing an image of the self as a unique and worthy individual. These relations are played out in one of the last groups of dolls inside the large gallery. They are also presented, in all their complexity, in the photographs and dolls in the mezzanine. They

show how the black family was also denied an existence, that under slavery mothers were frequently separated from their children and, victims of sexual violence perpetrated by their white masters or overseers, had to raise their children too. The topsy-turvy dolls – one half white, one half black, alternately revealed and hidden by a skirt - embody the ambiguity and complexity of social relations in the United States. Though we cannot be sure, these dolls may have served to explain mixed ethnicity to children born from a mixed marriage, or from the frequent rape of black women. Similarly, the photographs perhaps raise more questions than they answer: they show white children holding black dolls that we can imagine were made by their nurse (the doll providing a link to this maternal substitute for the child and, for the parents, a sign of social standing), and black children posing by themselves or with white children, clutching white dolls. From the 1910s, some of the black girls are proud to show off their black doll. The image that runs across the back wall, taken by an African-American photographer, shows a well-off and educated family, typical of the Harlem Renaissance. The girl sitting between her parents holds a white doll; still a social marker in a society that equates beauty with white.

"STILL I RISE"

The two screenings in the basement galleries carry on this presentation of Deborah Neff's collection. A final quote leads us in. It, too, has us listen to one of the voices raised: that of Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), one of the best-known African-American abolitionists and women's rights activists who sold her portrait on cartes de visite to raise money for her cause. Her words cast both light and shadow on the portraits projected on the walls. They are taken not from Deborah Neff's collection but were selected from four libraries, including that of the American sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) who campaigned against racism and for civil rights. An abridged version, in French, of *Like Dolls I'll Rise* is shown in the furthest room. Titled *Black Dolls*, this film by the exhibition's curator Nora Philippe weaves together the dolls with faces and voices from past and present.



Lionel Sabatté

Demeure

Each year since its creation, the Association des amis de La maison rouge (Friends of La maison rouge) has commissioned an artist to produce a work specifically for the foundation's patio. In recent years, visitors have had opportunities to view pieces by Florian Pugnaire and David Raffini (2014), Baptiste Debombourg (2015) and Boris Chouvellon (2016). In 2017, the Association's members have chosen Lionel Sabatté.

The installation he presents was imagined for (and inspired by) the site of La maison rouge. A peculiar *Demeure*. There is a hidden message in the title, a tongue-in-cheek hint at its surroundings, for this is a house within a house, a *demeure* (dwelling) inside a *maison* (house). See how its earthen walls glow red in the proximity of the foundation's walls, while the gaps in its construction prolong the openings made by the patio's bay windows. Still, the structure quickly veers off in a different direction; the metal framework breaks free of the blocks that contain it from all sides, stretching and extending towards the facade in frozen flight.

For this is the crux of Lionel Sabatté's art: to capture the tipping-point from one state to another and, in doing so, create a world within a world where anything can happen. The dark bodings which this *Demeure* could suggest rapidly give way to a swarm of existences past and future. We hear them whisper and this is no less foreboding, but so it is when different worlds intertwine.

Of course, we might struggle to rid our minds of the unbearable images that resurface – images of mass graves seen in the media or, more cinematographic, of heads brandished on poles... Yet as we stand on the threshold of this skull-lined cabin, we must train our thoughts on different

ways of living with death. We must think of the many cultures whose dwellings include an ossuary, or are even built where ancestors have been laid to rest so that they become, literally, the foundations of the home; remember too that just a few centuries ago, a live cat was walled into a newly-built house to ward off evil. Although we more likely think of catacombs, dances macabres, vanities and other reminders of our finitude.

Some see in this *Demeure* elements of the grotesque, in the art history sense of the term. In early Renaissance Italy, more exactly around 1480, excavations of Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea ("Golden House") revealed unprecedented examples of antique frescoes and ornamental stucco. "Grotesque", from the Italian *grottesca*, refers to the underground, cave-like (*grotta* in Italian) nature of these decorated ruins, but also to their overly ornate style, comprising myriad plants, animals and human figures.

The grotesque would later become even more rooted in the strange and the incongruous, sparking both amusement and terror, although its one constant is the multiplication and hybridisation of recurring motifs. *Demeure* plays on this heritage with fantastical creatures, mythological metaphors and formal experiments intended to defy death, or fragments of a decadent palace. Struts are still

visible at floor level along with an archaeologist's grid, echoed here and there by the metal structure. And from the walls themselves come other resurgences – not archaeological but geological: accumulations of matter suggesting core samples or clay stalactites.

Lionel Sabatté's work is a constant battle waged with matter. Among his many references (which include Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell*), he lists the Communards' Wall (*Mur des Fédérés*) at Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, where the faces and bodies of some of the one hundred and forty-seven executed Communards appear to float beneath the surface of the stone, wanting to break through. This shouldn't distract us from the fact that his art, both drawings and sculptures, is highly pictorial too, and displays a sensitivity to colour and matter that is typical of painting. Some of the cement has been coloured with spices, like watery paint tinted by oxidation. The painter's expressionistic touch is transposed to the sculpted substance. Walls become branches and shoots while a meticulous geometry of bars and blocks structures the whole, plane by plane.

There is more: while the artist chooses his materials for their plastic qualities, he seeks out their symbolic value too, and through this heightens the visual impact - instantly felt - of his work. Tea,

ash, charcoal, dust, rainwater, tree trunks, dead skin, nail clippings... their force gives them iconic and, in certain respects, esoteric status.

There is life in the protean works of Lionel Sabatté; transformations too and, through this, a sense of impermanence, however tragic this may appear to we who are but passing through. Created on-site, when the exhibition closes, *Demeure* will be destroyed. But that moment has yet to come. For the time being, we are invited to *dwell* a little longer. To dwell in the sense of to linger, for we have so little time.

Lionel Sabatté was born in 1975 in Toulouse: he lives and works between Paris and Los Angeles. A 2003 graduate of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he has won numerous prizes, such as those of the Institut Français in Mauritius, Yishu 8 in Beijing and, more recently, Drawing Now. He has had numerous solo shows in France and internationally, and his work is part of the collections at several institutions, including the ALTANA Kulturstiftung (Germany), the CAFA Art Museum (China), the FNAC and the FRAC La Réunion (France). Lionel Sabatté is represented by Galerie Ceysson Bénetière in Paris and by Galerie C in Neuchâtel (Switzerland).

la maison rouge

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- la maison rouge is accessible to disabled
visitors

tickets and passes

- full price: €10
- concessions: €7 (13-18s, students, maison
des artistes, over-65s)
- free for under-13s, jobseekers, the disabled
and a companion, ICOM, les amis de La maison
rouge
- tickets on sale at www.fnac.com
- full-price pass: €28
- reduced-price pass: €19

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