

# PepperPot

Multi Media Installation, Meaning, and the  
Medium in Contemporary African Diasporic Art



ANDREA CHUNG · LAUREN KELLEY · MOROLAKE ODELEYE · COSMO WHYTE

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The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum  
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum  
La Tropicale Catering, Durham

on front:

Image: Lauren Kelley, *Pick Wig*

# PepperPot

## Multi Media Installation, Meaning, and the Medium in Contemporary African Diasporic Art

### ABOUT the EXHIBITION

Coconut, humor, brown sugar, “bling,” moving images, cinnamon, and sound effects are just some of the ingredients in *PepperPot*—an exciting exhibition featuring work by four outstanding young artists: Andrea Chung, Lauren Kelley, Morolake Odeleye and Cosmo Whyte. All four artists are engaged in a practice of art making that places materials—the medium—at the center of meaning in their work. Working in a variety of disciplines, the artists in *PepperPot* address issues of power, identity, memory and personal history from within the context of the African diaspora. Curated by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum '04, *PepperPot* features multi media work ranging from painting and photography to installation, experimental animation and sculpture.

### ABOUT the ROBERT and SALLIE BROWN GALLERY and MUSEUM

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center's commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through the formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture.

## PEPPERPOT:

### MULTI MEDIA INSTALLATION, MEANING, and the MEDIUM in CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DIASPORIC ART

PAMELA PHATSIMO  
SUNSTRUM

**THE FOUR ARTISTS** featured in *PepperPot* are engaged in a practice of art making that positions materials — “the medium” — as the primary carrier of meaning in their work. What is “the medium” in art and, more importantly, what power does it hold for artists of the African diaspora? The medium in art is, strictly speaking, the materials used to make the work. This understanding, however, runs thin when we consider the historical and cultural art implications of the materials contemporary artists choose to use. Historically, the medium in the Western/Euro-centric art context, presented itself quite literally — canvas, pigment, paint, stone, wood, or paper. The medium was actually meant to exist “invisibly” in that both artist and viewer understood that to look at a work of art meant looking past, through, and beyond the medium — which was merely ‘the given’ — in order to discover the artists’ intended meaning. In other words, a viewer saw a painting, but did not look for the paint.

**AS CONCERNS IN** Western art history expanded so too did the notion of the medium. With modernism and high modernism in American art came an interest in *purity* of the medium. Informed by the ideas of art theorists such as Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), purity in the medium meant the pursuit of something exclusively “true” or “real” about each material. Thus, a painting should be about paint, about the flatness of the canvas. Subsequently, postmodern artists

understood that there was no such thing as purity of a medium — that all material, all mediums are enmeshed with the histories of their usage, with their cultural contexts. This postmodernist notion developed further with the emergence of installation art<sup>1</sup> in the 1990s in which the medium is understood to carry complex socio-political implications as well.

**IT IS IN THESE** implications of the medium that meaning emerges, which becomes relevant when seen in relation to concurrent movements in contemporary African diasporic art. It is here that I like to introduce the analogy of the *pepperpot* — the inspiration for the title and concept of this exhibition. Existing in many forms across the diaspora — as *gumbo*, as *callaloo* — pepperpot is a stew usually made from a savory arrangement of ingredients including seafood, meats, vegetables, and grains cooked at a daylong simmer within a bouquet of broths, coconut milk, and spices. The parallel to African diasporic histories, cultures and socio-politics becomes evident particularly as essentialized ideas about Blackness (with a big ‘B’) and Africanity give way to pluralistic understandings of Africanity that allow for a shifting, unfixed and transnational notion of blackness (with a small ‘b’)<sup>2</sup>. Returning to art, we see contemporary black artists relying upon the integrity and associative specificity of their materials in order to project meaning in their work. Art forms such as assemblage, shrine spaces, performance and installation; and artists such as Berni Searle,

#### Notes:

- 1 The term “installation art” refers to art work that is generally sculptural in nature but also tends to imply that the viewer have some physical interaction with the work — by entering into the space of the work, by participating in the work, etc. In this way, when considering installation art we speak less about an autonomous or singular sculptural *object* and are more concerned with notions of *space* and *spaces*, and how the viewer’s (and in many cases, the artist’s) *body* is implicated in the work.
- 2 For further explorations into the idea of blackness as a shifting, transnational identity: *Black is, Black ain’t* (1994), Marlon Riggs, filmmaker; *Postmodern blackness* (1990), Bell Hooks; *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), Trinh T. Minh-Ha; *Black Empire: The Masculine Global*

David Hammons, Betye Saar, El Anatsui, Ellen Gallagher, and Wangechi Mutu embody the pepperpot concept. Unlike the American “melting pot” which implies a generalizing of ingredients, an erasing of specificity, the pepperpot analogy in African diasporic art presents a synergistic concept of black identity in that each ingredient (medium) maintains its integrity and carries this power into the outcome.

**IN INVISIBLE CARGO**, composed of shipping pallets infused with ingredients and spices, Andrea Chung layers the medium—literally and figuratively—with the social and political implications they carry. The pallets are still pregnant with the history of their use and thus refer to the complexities of commerce, migration, labor and indentured servitude. They are then layered with more complexities as we experience the wafting aroma of coconut, spices and other foodstuffs connecting these global phenomena to ideas of comfort, family history and personal memory. Similarly, family history becomes the departure point for Cosmo Whyte’s multi-channel video installation in which he recalls the untimely death of his father. Using the funeral of his father as the central narrative, Whyte explores the ritual performativity of death and loss. He uses a process of animation derived from the work of William Kentridge, in which rather than drawing many cells to create the narrative, a single charcoal drawing is filmed, erased, re-drawn and filmed again, etc. In this way, each animated moment preserves the residue of all previously drawn moments. The installation then shifts between the performative/theatrical and the ritualistic/personal. Also working in animation, Lauren Kelly’s *Big Gurl* approaches the performativity of

blackness and black womanhood using humor and satire. Through a series of vignettes, *Big Gurl* addresses the social construction of black womanhood by using brown Barbie dolls to carry her narrative. The dolls themselves add to the meaning of the work in that they recall the process of socialization in black girlhood and implicate the Barbie doll as a tool in the racialized and gendered construction of identity. The identity construct becomes the centralizing concept of Morolake Odeleye’s installation and mixed-media sculptural works. Using mass media and popular culture as her primary medium, Odeleye dissects the construction of African-American identity in media representations and investigates the phenomenon of the emulation and appropriation of the African-American body—the African-American identity-construct—while also implicating/indicting the white bodies that consume this identity-construct.

**THE ARTISTS IN** *PepperPot* integrate new and old media—usually in unconventional combinations—in order to “explore their specific formal and conceptual possibilities, but also to address the concerns of identity, gender, war, race, colonial power and memory. In this way, the medium surfaces at, and as, the nexus of social and political debates”<sup>3</sup> as well as the source of power and meaning in their work. More significantly, perhaps, all four artists are engaged in a de/re-construction of blackness, identity, and personal narrative that is not contingent upon narrow or exclusive understandings of Africanity, but is rather a celebration of and a wrestling with the shifting, unfixable and slippery nature of the black experience.

WE SEE  
CONTEMPORARY  
BLACK ARTISTS  
RELYING UPON  
THE INTEGRITY  
AND ASSOCIATIVE  
SPECIFICITY OF  
THEIR MATERIALS  
IN ORDER TO  
PROJECT MEANING  
IN THEIR WORK

*Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States 1914-1962* (2005), Michelle Ann Stephens; *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (2004), Deborah A. Thomas; *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (2005), John L. Jackson Jr., *Santería Aesthetics* (1996) Arturo Lindsay ed.; and “*Expressing black subjectivities: Mapping the politics of nation, culture and ethnic identity in Afro-diasporic performance practices*,” Performance Studies International Conference, London, England, June 2006.

- 3 Many of the ideas about the role and definition of the medium in art presented here emerge out of discussions and ideas developed in a seminar titled “The Medium in Contemporary Art” led by Dr. T’ai Lin Smith at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Spring 2007.



## ABOUT the ARTISTS:

### ANDREA CHUNG

#### BIOGRAPHY

**ANDREA CHUNG** was born in Newark, NJ, in 1978. She graduated from Parsons School of Design in New York, NY with a BFA in illustration and is currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree at the Mount Royal School of Multi Media Art at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD.

**ANDREA CHUNG** has exhibited her work across the country including three solo exhibitions in Brooklyn, NY at the Butta' Cup Lounge and Caviar Studios, Artistic-Trends Salon in San Diego, California, and a group exhibit at Second City's 2003 Women's Festival of the Arts in Long Beach, California. In August 2004, she exhibited, organized and curated *Show & Tell: A Collection of Paintings*

and *Photographs by Andrea Chung, Emil King and Donwill* at St. Elmo Village in Los Angeles. In 2007, her work was selected for the 13th Annual International Exhibition of Women's Art at SoHo20 Chelsea Gallery in New York. In 2008, she will be featured in a solo exhibition at the Arlington Arts Center in Arlington, Virginia.

#### STATEMENT

**MY EXPLORATION** into "the medium" began simply with a personal interest in human geography; focusing on the questions why, where and how my grandparents found their way to Jamaica. I discovered that plausible answers to those questions were heavily shaped by centuries of trade in the Caribbean's history. Economies in the Caribbean and Latin America were dependent on cheap labor from Africa, China and India and raw goods such as sugarcane, cocoa, and bananas. I began to explore the relationships between these imported laborers and the exports produced by their labor, and the stories and ideas that these relationships carried. I also started to think about how materials can have the same narrative qualities as figurative paintings: they can imply a historical context, they can provide a vocabulary for double entendre, and they often have built in associations that can act as emotional stimuli. With these ideas in hand, I have set off to investigate the ways in which I can combine materials, not only to tell a story, but also to act as a catalyst for discussions surrounding trade as a medium.



#### *Invisible Cargo*

Spices/foodstuffs and mason  
jars on wooden shipping pallets  
Dimensions Variable, 2007

#### BIOGRAPHY

**MOROLAKE ODELEYE** received her Bachelor of Fine Arts with a concentration in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design in June 2007. Though working and studying in the Photography Department at RISD, she worked almost exclusively in video and installation. Often confrontational, her work is centered on discussions of race relations in America.

#### STATEMENT

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN** culture is routinely consumed by globalized systems of cultural exploitation. The music, the dress and language of the on-screen, the comedic, the thuggish, and the music video-ed African-American community is then mimicked creating a society of “copycat homies” speaking an ethnic patois removed from its history and context. More alarming than the presence of these “homies,” perhaps, is the rush by media machines to produce a never-ending portrayal of these African-American caricatures. My interest as an artist lies in exploring the desire to consume and produce this fetish-ized and reproducible African-American culture.

MOROLAKE  
ODELEYE



photography, single-channel projection with sound

## LAUREN KELLEY

### BIOGRAPHY

**LAUREN KELLEY** received her Master of Fine Arts in 1999 from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1997 from Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD. She was a Resident at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2007. Her work has been exhibited at several venues including the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX; The Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, TX; Anya Tish Gallery, Houston TX; Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX; The Casket Factory, Dallas, TX; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL; and Project Row Houses, Houston, TX. Reviews and essays on her work have appeared in ArtLies, Glasstire.com, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Houston Press*.



### STATEMENT

**MY MOST CURRENT** project consists of photographs, digital collages, and a series of short, stop animation videos. Animating brown Barbie like dolls, I'm constructing a plastic community while being flippant about clichéd notions of black women as callused, bitter or challenging to penetrate. This project's genesis was a response to 60s politics that altered the perception of women (collectively) from weak to strong. To this day, perceiving black women (distinctively) as strong, often equates to being treated like a thoroughbred. Acknowledging toys as a socializing tool, I aim to redirect doll maker strategies for promoting ideas about femininity. Dolls featured in the photos and video work have been individually endowed with clay and photographed in detailed settings to re-contextualize the dark and robust woman as a feminine archetype.

**THIS PROJECT** represents an ongoing investigation that ultimately aims to expand the space allotted for critically exploring ideas about black girlhood/womanhood being misunderstood and relationships created in/ beyond "the hood."

**Big Gurl** (still from animation)  
Stop motion animation,  
8 mins 11 secs, 2006

## PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM

### ABOUT the CURATOR

Artist and curator Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum received her Bachelor of Arts in International Studies with a concentration in Trans-National Cultures from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2004. In 2007, she received a Master in Fine Arts from the Mount Royal School of Multi Media Art at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD. She has exhibited her artwork both nationally and internationally. In 2007, she was a featured artist in the



## BIOGRAPHY

**COSMO WAS BORN** in St. Andrew, Jamaica in 1982. He attended Cornwall College High School in Montego Bay, Jamaica and later attended Bennington College in Vermont where he received his Bachelor in Fine Arts degree. He spent a year at the Maryland Institute College of Art where he received a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate. In summer 2007, he participated in the Taller Portobello Norte Artist Colony in Portobello, Panama. He currently lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland.

## STATEMENT

**I AM INTERESTED** in the juxtaposition of the private and ritualistic aspects of funerals and their simultaneously public and performative elements. I investigate these themes using oil painting, video animation, photography, site-specific installations, and charcoal drawings. My aim is to make the viewer conscious of their position as both a voyeur and participant in these sacred ceremonies.



***The Outing*** (detail)  
Charcoal on paper, 50" x 25"

groundbreaking exhibition *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970* at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art. Sunstrum's other curatorial projects at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History include *Letters from Home: The Work of Michael D. Harris* in 2004 and *Como se cuenta el cuento (How is the Story Told): The work of El Taller Portobello* in 2005. Sunstrum currently lives and works in Baltimore, MD.

## EXHIBITION LIST

ANDREA CHUNG:

***Invisible Cargo***

Spices/foodstuffs and mason jars on  
wooden shipping pallets  
Dimensions Variable, 2007

***It come een like...***

Wooden shipping pallets, brown sugar,  
arrowroot, coffee and allspice  
Dimensions Variable, 2007

***Agatha Barton III***

Brown sugar on wall  
Approx. 97" x 48"  
2007

***Agatha's Foot***

Leg cast in brown sugar and paste  
Approx. 24" x 8" x 5"  
2007

LAUREN KELLEY:

***Big Gurl***

Stop motion animation  
8 mins 11sec  
2006

***Chicken Wig***

Photograph  
20" x 24"  
1999

***Nail Wig***

Photograph  
20" x 24"  
1999

***Pick Wig***

Photograph  
20" x 24"  
1999

MOROLAKE ODELEYE

***The Ultimate Yellow Brick***

Mixed Media, mannequin hands, patent  
leather, cast resin  
Site-specific installation  
2007

COSMO WHYTE

***In My Dreams He Never Speaks***

Installation with 2-channel animation,  
sound, fabric and plaster cast  
Dimensions Variable, 2007

***The Outing*** (still from animation)

Charcoal on paper  
50" x 25"  
2006

***In Our Sunday Best*** (still from animation)

Charcoal on paper  
50" x 25"  
2006

***Meet Me by the River***

Graphite and acrylic on clayboard  
14" x 24"  
2006

## HISTORY and OVERVIEW of CENTER

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University's Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University's academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African-Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

## GALLERY STAFF

Pamela Sunstrum, Guest Curator  
Andrew Chan, Undergraduate Fellow  
Randy Simmons, Facilities Manager  
Nathanial Shelness, Docent  
Anslei Foster, Docent  
Anwar Harris, Facilities Coordinator

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