



Kamal Al Mansour, (above) *Somebody SCREAM!!! The Bifurcation of Hip Hop Consciousness*, 2006, pastel, found objects, digital imagery, mixed-media assemblage on paper, 48" x 36" x 1"; (below) *American Profile #1: Curbside Just-us*, 2009, pastel, found objects, digital imagery, mixed-media assemblage on paper, at NoneSuch Space, Oakland.

## Kamal Al Mansour at NoneSuch Space

With the election of a nonwhite president, the issue of racial identity, so much on artists' minds since the 1980s, has taken on political importance and spread further into the wider population beyond the art world. East Bay artist Kamal Al Mansour creates large, mixed-media shadow-box dioramas that depict the black experience in the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa. A dazzling draftsman with the sharp eye and fluent hand of a skilled illustrator, the artist has had careers in law, finance and software in addition to art. These overlapping interests lend his work a perspective that allows him to educate viewers about sociopolitical issues without preaching; and the works' mixture of drawing, collage/assemblage and digital imagery has a contemporary look and an emotional appeal, elements not usually conjoined, that serve to draw viewers into the work. This is serious, engaged art that is also widely appealing.

*Truth and Consequences*, curated by NoneSuch Space's Ann Skinner-Jones, is comprised of roughly twenty works. While the exhibition's title may suggest the New Mexico town Truth or Consequences, as well the game show named after it, Al Mansour's point is to insist that the truth about slavery be told, and the results of that centuries-long tragedy be addressed—not only by black Americans that carry its emotional scars generations later, but by all Americans, even those whose ancestors benefited from the South's "peculiar institution." Martin Luther King, Jr., correctly considered the slave masters to be victims of racism, too; we're not all free at last yet.

Al Mansour examines cultural identity through dramatic portraiture. Beautifully rendered pastel drawings of various protagonists are juxtaposed with collaged backgrounds or backdrops composed of historical and contemporary photographs—sometimes heroic and sometimes antiheroic. The tension between





drawn and photographed elements in these stage sets or dioramas symbolizes the fraught relationship between the vividly tangible present (drawn) and the frozen, vanished past (photographed); viewers emotionally connect to the living, but are asked to consider the past in a broader context.

Several images pay homage to black culture heroes. The elegant *Makeda, Queen of Sheba* (2006), derives from the ancient past, namely, tenth-century B.C. Ethiopia. A more recent example is slugger Hank Aaron, depicted in *Hammerin' HANK* (2007); having begun his career in the Negro Leagues, Aaron faced racist threats when his major-league home run record threatened The Babe's. The deep shadow box features a portrait of the player and a background composed of photographic montages, a cloth Milwaukee Braves shirt and cap, and a listing of his career achievements, appropriately framed by bats and baseballs. Other works, like *ManChild* (2006), *The Progeny* (2005) and *The Faith Defender* (2007) step out of history to depict symbolic or archetypal figures.

While Al Mansour commemorates black progress, he is equally clear-sighted about present and future challenges. In *The Future Still Belongs to Me* (2005), a poignant mother and child scene is set within the confining sculptural space of walls and a roof in a larger urban landscape, dramatizing the threat of homelessness. In *How you gonna know where I'm at, unless you've been where I've been ... You understand where I'm comin' from?!* (2008), a young black man (who, judging by his shirt and tie, has entered the economic mainstream) stands before a collaged landscape of public housing projects, one apartment block stacked atop another like geological strata; he quizzically challenges viewers to see him as more than just "the black guy" in the office. *American Profile #1: Curbside Justus* (2009) examines racial profiling by law enforcement with its trio of young black men standing, legs splayed, waiting to be searched and released. The central figure, in a white shirt and blue jeans, gazes fearlessly at viewers; his two companions, like Christ's thieves, take secondary positions, facing the wall with only handcuffs visible on their silhouetted forms while two white policemen, wielding shotgun and clipboard, hem them in and real shell casings litter the constructed 3-D sidewalk.

The destructive negativity of some aspects of pop culture comes in for criticism as well. *Somebody SCREAM!!! The Bifurcation of Hip Hop Consciousness* (2006) is a double portrait: a young rapper raises a fist gripping a microphone, but he is split down the middle, torn between, on the left side, painted red, rap's early political radicalism (symbolized by a Mandela button) and, on the right side, rendered in green, the exploitative gangsta rap that followed, with its misogynistic exaltation of "pimp and ho, and

playa, too," (excerpt from Al Mansour poem) epitomized by the subject's rhinestone dollar-sign amulet. *Inventing Souls #2* (2004) imagines the same choice between sacrifice and enjoyment faced by a young woman wearing an Angela Davis sweatshirt. Posters of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and rap star Lil' Kim vie for her attention—"Life, liberty and freedom," in the artist's words, versus "bling, bang and bucks."

Al Mansour also considers the viewpoint of aging Freedom Marchers. In *The Preponderance of Time, and Impatience of the Old* (2007), a graying black scholar ponders an hourglass on his library desk, wondering if the new generation will continue the struggle or succumb to giddy consumerism. One imagines the nation's white founders similarly dismayed at their often shortsighted and less-than-heroic descendants.

—DeWitt Cheng

Kamal Al Mansour: *Truth and Consequences* closed March 28 at NoneSuch Space, Oakland.

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