

# MUSÉE

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## TODD GRAY: REALITY REFRAMED | THE 8TH FLOOR

REVIEWS



Todd Gray, *Sketch (Axim Nana, Fort St. Anthony)*, 2022. Two archival pigment prints with UV laminate in found frames and artist's frames. 25 x 38 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Written by Trip Avis

Like stitching patterns together in a blanket, Todd Gray's work sutures dissimilar and seemingly disconnected imagery to create something unique and personal. By blending subjects, themes, colors, and visual textures, Gray crafts a highly sensory

viewing experience that does more than dazzle the eye—his work raises essential sociological questions. It explores moral dilemmas through its contrasting subject matter. On the topic of Western cultural subjugation via colonialism and imperialism, Gray states that “[...] it is so important to wrestle the narrative away from art history and re-channel it.” An academic field still dominated mainly by Eurocentric aesthetic ideals, work like Gray’s celebrates and helps define the flourishing paradigm shift towards a more global, inclusive concept of artistic beauty. Presented by the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, The 8th Floor will display the bold, original works of *Todd Gray: Reality Reframed* between February 22 and April 13, 2024.



Todd Gray, *Euclidean Gris Gris (Scales of Injustice, No Respect)*, 2019. Five archival pigment prints in artist’s frames and found frames, UV laminate. 61 1/2 x 98 3/4 x 4 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis Gallery, New York.

Gray’s piece, *Euclidean Gris Gris (Scales of Injustice, No Respect)* 2019, explores the parasitic relationship between the ‘Old World’ and the ‘New World.’ This relationship is largely sustained through a widespread internalized perspective of an urbane, elegant Old World versus a New World characterized by a rough, rural exoticism. The piece contrasts European notions of nature, as exemplified by a prim French-style garden, with the nature of more tropical climates, indicated by the

palms and root-strewn boulders. The central part of this uniquely constructed triptych is a gilt scroll frame overlaid with two smaller oval frames. The most intriguing aspect is the placement of a goat over the head of the human statue. Though this peculiar compositional choice is open to interpretation, it could suggest that the agricultural industry of regions outside Europe (symbolized by the goat) is the true emblem of power over the staid, statued figures of the European ruling class. This disparity is further highlighted by the two smaller frames, which buttress the central piece and feature carefully trimmed topiaries.



Todd Gray, *Nike D.O. / Versailles*, 2021. Three archival pigment prints in artists's frames, UV laminate 65 7/8 x 81 3/8 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maurine, New York.

*Nike D.O. / Versailles*, 2021 is a beguiling piece that fuses French and Nigerian art forms, highlighting similar hierarchical conceptions. The larger of the three images depicts a garden folly at the Petit Trianon, Marie-Antoinette's infamous pleasure palace on the grounds of the Chateau de Versailles. The wrought-iron structure is ornately detailed, featuring a cross-hitch pattern, and topped with delicate metallic bouquets. Equally elaborate is the image that overlays it, a portrait of the esteemed Nigerian textile artist Nike Davies-Okundaye, who dons bright beaded jewelry and a richly patterned headdress she is famous for creating. Interestingly, her face is obscured by yet another image depicting a jungle of palm trees. Marie-Antoinette and her likeness are embedded in the public consciousness, thanks to the erroneous yet iconic phrase 'Let them eat cake' and films like Sofia Coppola's 2006 indie rock

pastel confection. One cannot help but notice the similarities between the towering wigs worn by the ill-fated queen and the height and regality of Davies-Okundaye's queenly headdress. Like Marie-Antoinette, the artist's portrait has been stripped of its identity — her face — allowing her work and reputation as a master textile artist to speak for itself.



Todd Gray, *Cosmic Trail of Tears (above/below)*, 2022. Four archival pigment prints with UV laminate and artist's frames. 81 x 53 x 6 in. Courtesy of the artist.

*Cosmic Trail of Tears*, 2022, is one of the most profoundly affecting pieces due to the images' visual journey and the title's implications. Composed of four individually framed images, it is rife with interpretive possibilities. The largest image at the bottom of the piece depicts the lush, sylvan path; however, this path is not one of natural bliss but a dividing force that pulled enslaved people farther from their

homelands and their freedom. In the narrative journey of the piece, the slave trail to the Cape Coast Slave Castle fuses with the image of the waves above, depicting the Ghanaian coastline—the last door closing on their lives as they knew them. One of the more puzzling aspects of the piece is the inclusion of a portrait of R&B singer Keisha Jackson, overlaid with an image of a star-encrusted outer space. Jackson's black ensemble is covered with white polka-dots, alluding to the clustered night sky. Like the stars, she becomes like a deity, watching over with a calm, dignified assurance.

Gray's rich narrative collages defy standard conceptions of photography. By taking what could otherwise be a pleasing image, like a French garden or a tropical jungle, and blending or overlaying them with striking portraiture, Todd Gray illuminates a phantom conversation previously unseen but always there, waiting to be given its due.

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