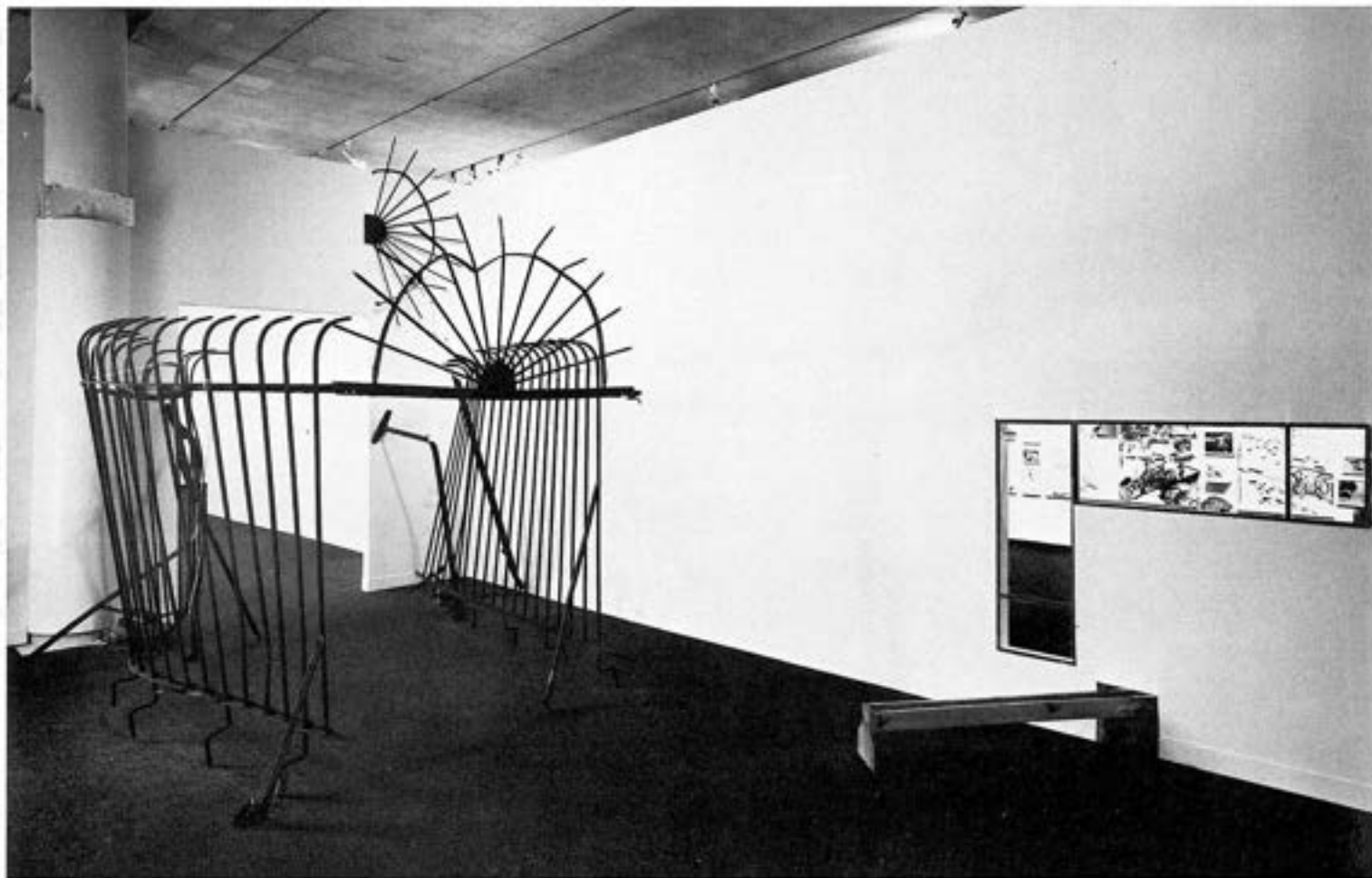


CURRENTS

August 7-September 22, 1982

Candace Hill-Montgomery

The New Museum



Candace Hill-Montgomery works in a variety of media. She is at once painter, poet, performer, photographer, and sculptor. The common denominator is the method, which is essentially that of collage, or its more three-dimensional corollary, assemblage. By incorporating fragments of objects and/or photographs in her paintings, drawings, and sculpture, she juxtaposes strata of different realities which coalesce and form a new reality. Likewise, her installations include three-dimensional objects and sculpture as well as two-dimensional drawings and paintings, which are themselves collages.

Through her use of collage, Hill-Montgomery taps a sensibility basic to the twentieth century. Because of its wide-spread use and assimilation, it is easily forgotten that collage, as an artistic technique, is a relatively recent invention. First employed in Cubist still lifes, it allowed the artist to "incorporate reality without imitating it."¹ The implications and practice of employing actual objects not originally intended as art materials, and by "assembling," rather than by painting, drawing, or sculpting them, have profoundly affected the course of art in this century.²

Whereas the technique of collage can be traced back to the first decade of the twentieth century, Hill-Montgomery's art very firmly situates her in the present and reflects her situation as black and female within a racist and sexist world. She states: "We live with polarization, poverty, racism, violence, brutalization and social fragmentation. The brutalization that is done in the name of America, here and elsewhere in the world could not continue if one could change the passivity and the people's power to ignore or disregard the dehumanization of third world peoples. I want the viewer to feel what it is like to be alive and constantly under siege!"³

Collage, then, is a likely vehicle through which Hill-Montgomery can address this brutalization and inform the viewer of it. Lucy Lippard has noted that many politically active artists employ collage because it "is born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a glue with which to get the pieces into some sort of new order."⁴ Furthermore, the inclusion of real, identifiable objects speaks directly to both a select art-world audience and the wider public. The reassembled objects, by virtue of their displacement and new context, can have a highly charged impact.

Coexisting with Hill-Montgomery's awareness of the state of global affairs is a lyrical, poetic sensibility. And if the concerns of her art are universal in implication, the inspiration is always personal. For example, a series of mixed-media collage paintings from 1979-81 entitled *Historic Extinctions* re-examines "old truths in the Black struggle against Imperialism."⁵ This series employs real objects, including barbed wire, army fatigue pants, and nooses, to suspend the painting collages which are sandwiched between plexiglass. The horrendous realities which are depicted in photographs, glued to the surface, jar our sensibilities, numbed even as they are by the many atrocities pictured daily in newspapers and on television. For example, in *An Unknown Relative* (1979-80), the photograph is of a dead black man, whose broken body is bound to a tree by chains. The hideous reality depicted in the photograph is made tangible since the painting collage is itself suspended by chains. The inherent inexpressiveness of the photographic surface is contrasted with the immediacy and idiosyncrasy of the painted surface, a record of the artist's reactions to the information contained in the photographs. The result is one that intentionally both engages and repulses the viewer.

The impetus for this series was an incident that occurred while Hill-Montgomery was working with truants from Manhattan's Martin Luther King High School. When, on Martin Luther King's birthday, a film documenting the hosings employed to break up Civil Rights marches was greeted with laughter, Hill-Montgomery realized that for a generation of children reared under the tutelage of television, film often denoted fantasy or allowed distance. The real objects clue us into the reality pictured in the photographs. Hill-Montgomery notes: "I am not taking ordinary objects as the Surrealists did and raising them to 'the level of art'; quite the opposite, I am using the objects to hang the work so as to keep these realities outside of art, to bring us back into the reality of our existence, to remind us of the naked truths of the world we live in."⁶

Concurrent with the *Historic Extinctions* series were several outdoor environmental installations, prompted by her experiences of living and working in the ghetto. *Reflections on Vacancy* and *Black and White in Closure* (both from 1979) were installed in guerilla-like fashion across the street from each other on 121st

Street and Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. The former consisted of an abandoned building whose empty windows, typically boarded up with tin, were replaced with silvery sheets of Mylar. Eerily reflecting back mirror images of passersby, the silver surfaces contrasted sharply with the surrounding urban desolation. Directly facing *Reflections on Vacancy*, Hill-Montgomery similarly "collaged" two elements in *Black and White in Closure*. A dry-docked fishing boat is "enclosed" by a twelve-foot-high picket fence. Ironically, this inordinately tall fence makes a right angle then stops abruptly, not enclosing the boat at all. This installation incorporated a found object (the boat belonged to one of the neighborhood's residents) and a constructed spear-like picket fence, painted immaculately white on the exterior and jet black on the interior. Numerous levels of meaning were readily apparent to the uninitiated art-world audience.⁷

Whereas these two installations commented generally on the black urban experience, *Food for Thought* (1981) addressed a specific issue, namely President Reagan's budget cuts affecting health, education, and welfare funding. Installed in Washington, D.C. on a grassy plot directly in front of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, three altered, marble-topped kitchen cabinets marked the intersections of a triangular periphery, linked by linoleum walkways.⁸ Enclosed were several kitchen chairs and a placard admonishing: "PROTEST BUDGET CUTS. SIT IN HERE FOR FOOD FOR CHANGE." Integral to this piece was the "performance" which included Hill-Montgomery's solicitation of ethnic foods from the surrounding neighborhoods in order to stock the cabinets.⁹ Shop owners were encouraged to replace the foods daily, thereby returning a small percentage of their profits back to the populace which in turn has made up their clientele. The cabinets were boldly painted with images directly pertaining to food (such as a plate and fork) as well as with natural elements (such as a robin), recalling both the source of the foodstuffs and the rural settings of an earlier series of paintings with children and animals.¹⁰

Furthermore, while this installation spoke to specific budget cuts, the overall implications were much greater in scope. Food and food-related issues were also the focus of several major installations, among them *General Coldspot Memorials to Indifference in the Year of our Lord 1981* (1981). This work

consisted of a row of twenty-six refrigerator doors, their placement on the beachfront of Battery Park City landfill echoing the skyline of lower Manhattan. Detached from their original function, the doors stood as reminders of the indifference to world famine, the politics of hunger made explicit by the toy military weapons occupying the door shelves.¹¹

The expressive power and potential of words to communicate have been explored by Hill-Montgomery in both her poetry and her art and are often integrated. Interested in the arts since childhood, she was attracted in her teens to the community of poets, ranging from Allen Ginsberg to Amiri Baraka, active in Greenwich Village in the early sixties. Indeed, writing and text are integral to her art, and most ideas germinate in the copious journals she keeps. These journals usually take the place of drawings or sketches for installations or works—the process of writing itself sufficient to generate and fix the mental image.

Words figure prominently in a recent piece. Invited to participate in the exhibition "Beyond Aesthetics" at Henry Street Settlement in lower Manhattan, Hill-Montgomery responded with a proposal to spell "a word like Truth in the earth with dominoes and soccer balls" in a courtyard in the back of the building. Interested in all the implications attached to a concept like "Truth," Hill-Montgomery chose instead to write the words "ME LIE" with the dominoes, recalling the Vietnamese massacre My Lai, as well as "melee," a confused hand-to-hand battle. Hill-Montgomery contradicted her original proposal, placing the words not in the earth but along the legs of the concrete benches immediately adjacent, a visual metaphor for the lies and mistruths at the very foundations of society. The dominoes refer both to the game, popular in the neighboring Latin community, and to the famous political theory. In *A Word Like Truth in the Earth/I Lied*, Hill-Montgomery succeeds in succinctly unifying word with image, a union that richly resounds with a multitude of meanings.

The current installation at The New Museum, *Jade Ball Frug Pond (The Shatter of the Dark Green Shutter)*, both reiterates issues present in past work and seeks a more personal, lyrical means of communicating those concerns.¹² "Jade Ball Frug Pond" is excerpted from a libretto in process, *The Shatter of the Dark Green Shutter*, which is related to previous works, *92 Morningside and Remember Fred Hampton* (1980) and *Nyack*

(1982), the former having been installed at "The Times Square Show" and at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Inspired by a raid at 92 Morningside Avenue in search of Black Army Liberationist Assata Shakur, and recalling the murder of Black Panther minister Fred Hampton a decade earlier, this installation underscored the continuing black struggle. References to other figures like Malcolm X, George Jackson, and more recently Solomon Brown all permeate Hill-Montgomery's work. As an artist, she is searching for a formal means to communicate a personal vision in the face of these omnipresent realities. Over time, her goals have become more ambitious, and she has begun to tackle more universal issues, such as justice. In a recent installation of circular drawings and prose poems, *Hint Medallions Hinted Circa 1981* (1981), she has explored some of the motivating forces which underlie creativity, such as sex and love.

A videotape, *Hospicios Cabañas Children* (1979-80), co-produced with Bill Stephens, is included as part of the current installation. Shot in an orphanage in Guadalajara, Mexico, it shows children playing in a courtyard with a fountain. The camera is stationary; the children pass randomly in and out of our limited view. After a few seconds, we realize that we are watching the children from behind a barred door or window. The focus slowly dissolves, then sharpens; time seems to extend over a lazy idyllic afternoon. A soundtrack of guitar music by Andres Segovia contributes to the peaceful atmosphere. When the music stops, the camera pulls back and circles around overhead to scenes of the Spanish conquest by Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco. The violence in the murals contrasts sharply with the idyllic scenes witnessed just moments ago, and it is difficult to believe that the two locations are shot within the same building. As if to reassure us, the camera returns to the courtyard, allowing one more glimpse of the children.

In *Hospicios Cabañas Children*, the coexistence of youthful innocence and the graphic reminders of past enslavement poignantly summarize the two sides of Candace Hill-Montgomery's art, the lyrical and the political. The strength of her work stems from the reconciliation of these opposites in a powerful union. In her use of collage and assemblage, she often combines drawings with her writings and ready-made, found objects, thus juxtaposing a personal mark and image with a mechanically

produced and/or natural one. In so doing, she both draws upon an art historical legacy and extends it through an individual vision. Addressing both the specifics and the metaphysics of existence, her art is at once accessible yet mysterious.

Lynn Gumpert
Curator

Notes

1. Margaret Miller cited by William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, ex. cat., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 6.
2. Seitz, *ibid*.
3. Candace Hill-Montgomery, "Notes," in Lucy R. Lippard, *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists*, ex. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1980), n.p.
4. Lippard, *Issue*, n.p.
5. Hill-Montgomery, unpublished journal, 1981-82, n.p.
6. Hill-Montgomery, *Issue*, n.p.
7. Interestingly, the installation remained graffiti-free for its duration.
8. The artist has remarked that the triangular configuration functioned in part as an ironic commentary on Judy Chicago's infamous *Dinner Party*.
9. In her absence, staff members from the Washington Project for the Arts, the organization which sponsored this project as part of the exhibition "Street-work," continued to stock the cabinets. Many of Hill-Montgomery's installations and performances involve other people's participation, extending the definition of collage.
10. This series from 1974-75, was inspired by the setting of the day school her children attended and where she taught part-time.
11. Also on the backs of the refrigerators were a series of plaques.
12. *Jade Ball Frug Pond* initiates an ongoing series of installations generically titled *The Shatter of the Dark Green Shutter* to be done in collaboration with Grace Williams.

The New Museum

65 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10003
(212) 741-8962

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Cover and above: Installation views of *Jade Ball Frugue Pond (The Shafter of the Dark Green Shutter)*, 1982, at The New Museum. The installation also includes work by Patricia Phipps and Grace Williams. (Please note corrected spelling of installation title.)

Candace Hill-Montgomery

Born in New York, N.Y., 1945. Attended Fordham University (B.A. 1977) and Hunter College, both in New York City. Lives in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1979 Artists Space, New York
Roosevelt Public Library/Art Gallery, Roosevelt, Long Island, New York
- 1980 Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
- 1981 Lobby of Two World Trade Center, New York (organized by World Trade Centers Association)
- 1982 Harlem State Office Building, New York (organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem)

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1979 *Icarus Odyssey*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Guadalajara, Mexico (sponsored by Rainbow Arts Foundation, New York)
- 1980 *Alienation*, Group Material, New York
Artists in Residence: 1980, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Critics Invitational, Hal Bromm Gallery, New York
Events: Fashion Moda, Taller Boricua, Artists Invite Artists, The New Museum, New York (cat. essay by Lynn Gumpert)
Fashion Moda, Bronx, New York
Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (cat. essay by Lucy R. Lippard; traveled)
Pages Plus: Artists' Bookworks, Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City, Mo. (organized by Franklin Furnace Archives, New York)
- 35 *Under 35*, New York Urban League, New York (cat. essay by Adel de Knight)
- The Times Square Show*, 41st St. and Seventh Ave., New York (organized by Collaborative Projects Inc.)
- 1981 *Action Against Racism in the Arts*, Westbeth Gallery, New York
Art on the Beach, Battery Park City landfill, New York (organized by Creative Time Inc.)
Atlanta Show, Group Material, New York
Crimes of Compassion, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Va. (cat. essay by Tom Stryon)
'Energy Riot': Project Union Square, 14th St. and Fourth Ave., New York (organized by the artist)
Enthusiasm, Group Material, New York
Schemes: A Decade of Installation Drawings, Elise Meyer Gallery, New York (cat. essay by Shelley Rice; traveled)
Streetworks, sites in Washington, D.C. (organized by Washington Project for the Arts)
Teamwork the American Way, Franklin Furnace, New York
What's the Most Important Thing in Your Life, American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (organized by the artist as part of an educational outreach program; sponsored by Chesebrough-Ponds, Inc.)
Words & Images: A Contemporary Survey of Artists' Books, Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia
The Working Process, City Gallery, New York (cat. by Margo Machida and Benjamin Grubler; organized by Organization of Independent Artists)
- 1982 *Benefit Exhibition*, American Indian Community House, New York (organized by Alternative Museum)

Beyond Aesthetics: Art of Necessity by Artists of Conscience, Louis Abrons Arts for Living Center, Henry Street Settlement, New York (cat. essay by Juan Sanchez)

Enthusiasm, Group Material, New York
documenta 7 (Fashion Moda store organized by Jenny Holzer and Stefan Eins), Kassel, W. Germany (cat. essay by Rudi Fuchs et al.)

Lou Forgione's Sixth Annual Art Exhibit, Forgione Estate, Hempstead, New York

Peter Kattenberg Gallery, Basel, Switzerland

M5 Bus Show, M5 city buses en route, New York (organized by Group Material)

Working Women/Working Artists/Working Together, Bread & Roses Gallery, Martin Luther King Labor Center, New York (organized by the artist and Lucy R. Lippard)

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- . "Cross Bronx Expressly," *Soho News*, December 30, 1980, p. 23.
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