

Portland Press Herald

ARTS REVIEW >

Art review: Nyeema Morgan grants permission to rethink iconic works

Her exhibition at Grant Wahlquist Gallery reframes well-known works of art with frosted Plexiglas and phrases that impart new meaning.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO

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Installation of "Nyeema Morgan: Soft Power. Hard Margins." at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in Portland. All works are mixed paper media, cast resin, Plexiglas, composite gold foil and LEDs. *Photos courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Portland, Maine*

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

It's really not hard to get the gist of "Nyeema Morgan: Soft Power. Hard Margins." (through May 14), the show that inaugurates the spring art season at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in downtown Portland. At least superficially. Even those unschooled in art history will recognize iconic paintings such as DaVinci's "Last Supper" and Michelangelo's "David," or Edvard Munch's "The Scream" and Hokusai's "The Wave."

Morgan partially obscures these works with a layer of frosted Plexiglas into which she etches phrases that feel randomly truncated across the surface. So, for instance, over the "David," the phrase "Permission to Be Masterful" is broken up this way:

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Nyeema Morgan: Soft Power. Hard Margins."

WHERE: Grant Wahlquist Gallery, 30 City Center, 2nd Floor, Portland

WHEN: Through May 14

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday (to 8 p.m. on first Friday of the month)

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-245-5732, grantwahlquist.com

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A string of LED lights illuminates the liminal space between the image and the Plexi. Morgan then enshrines each piece with a classical frame cast in resin using a mold she has created from an intricate frame she sculpted. Sometimes she leaves extra bits of resin that might have been trimmed off protruding from the edges. Finally, she applies gold leaf, but only partially so that the creamy resin remains quite visible. The gold leaf can at times also invade the Plexiglas itself, further obscuring both image and message.

You could make the rounds of the gallery and decipher the phrases and the way they connect or refer to each image, then pat yourself on the back for your cleverness and descend the stairs to Monument Square to get on with your day. That would be a colossal mistake (and a great pity) because you will have come to this second-floor gallery above Hi-Fi Donuts in vain and fed only your ego.

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The more time we spend with Morgan's works, the more they begin to reveal multitudinous ideas about art, its contexts and contradictions, and our own assumptions about what art is and is not. We also begin to understand how our own perceptions, filtered through the reality in which we live, impart meaning to the works that neither the original artist nor the one appropriating that image could have foreseen.

I will only try to deconstruct a few elements here, as even after viewing the show, new revelations pursued me out of the gallery like a persistent toddler repeating the same question – “But why?” – ad nauseum. This is a really good thing.

First, the accusations lobbed at conceptual art are endless: It's cold, sterile, pretentious, more concerned with obtuse intellectual ideas than beauty. This show proves this needn't be so. Materially, these objects are sensuous and dazzling in a way that is almost hedonistic and glitzy. The lights, the reflectivity, the gold leaf, the decorativeness of the frames ... these feel irresistibly seductive.

Which, of course, does not preclude them from being intellectual. Morgan draws inspiration from the artist Adrian Piper, specifically a 1983 essay in which she wrote, “the right to freedom of expression is a permission, granted by the state, to engage in certain activities.”

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Nyeema Morgan, "Soft Power. Hard Margins. (1987)," 2020, 18.5 x 15.5 x 3 in, based on Andres Serrano's "Immersion (Piss Christ)"

Artists throughout millennia and in every medium and art form have challenged the “permissions” granted by the state, institutions and society in terms of what is considered “acceptable,” “beautiful” and so on. Who can forget Andres Serrano’s 1987 photograph “Immersion (Piss Christ)” – a plastic crucifix immersed in a jar of Serrano’s own urine – which, among other controversial works, led to self-righteous budget cuts at the National Endowment for the Arts?

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In a sense, Morgan's works are granting artists a whole set of new permissions. Not surprisingly, "Piss Christ" is, here, overlaid with the words "Permission to Be Blasphemous." From a boundary-pushing artist like Morgan, we might expect some of these clearances: "Permission to Buck Convention" (over Marcel Duchamp's upturned urinal), "Permission to Abandon Conventional Figuration" (over Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon") and "Permission to Be Masochistic" (over Chris Burden's "Shoot," a performance piece in which he had a friend shoot him in the arm with a .22-caliber rifle).



Nyeema Morgan, "Soft Power. Hard Margins. (1498)," 2020, 31 x 43 x 3 in, based on Leonardo's DaVinci's "Last Supper"

Others merely acknowledge accepted artistic conventions, such as self-portraiture ("Permission to Be Self Referential" over Velázquez's "Las Meninas") or religious painting ("Permission to Be Pious" over DaVinci's "Last Supper"). And some permissions are achingly sweet, as in "Permission to Indulge in the Resplendent Beauty of Love" (superimposed on Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss") and "Permission to Empathize" (over Dorothea Lange's indelible portrait "Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California").

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But some of the works get more complicated when considered against the backdrop of contemporary times. It is impossible to look at Munch's "Scream," over which Morgan superimposes "Permission to Acknowledge the Horror of Everyday Existence," and not think of the devastation, inhumanity and lethal arrogance of the war in Ukraine.



Nyeema Morgan, "Soft Power. Hard Margins. (1930)," 2020, 28 x 22 x 3 in, based on Grant Wood's "American Gothic"

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Two works creepily evoked the devious manipulation of so-called “American values” that were the former U.S. presidential administration’s stock in trade: “Permission to Objectify American Provincialism” (Grant Wood’s “American Gothic”) and “Permission to Be Nostalgic for American Provincialism” (Andrew Wyeth’s “Christina’s World”). “Permission to Express Political Dissent” (over Picasso’s “Guernica”) chillingly brings to mind the ways Russia, China and other totalitarian regimes silence free speech.

There is also the function of the frame to consider. Framing a work memorializes it and gives it credence and legitimacy. Morgan is clearly asking questions, then, about how specific art canons are “framed”: Who grants this imprimatur? What makes this genre or work worthy of reverence? What is a masterpiece? Gilt frames, in particular, also make works more “precious.” What and who accords them this value?

It’s hard to deny the irony in framing certain artworks this way: i.e., Duchamp’s urinal or his “Nude Descending a Staircase,” or even a Monet sunset, for that matter. At the time of their creation, they were considered scandalous and transgressive. Yet bestowing them with this preciousness practically mainstreams the concepts and techniques that gave them birth. It is less a critique of the art itself than the fickleness of critics, collectors and the art public. Today, we think of Impressionist paintings as “pretty,” and Chris Burden’s “Shoot” would likely elicit little more than an eye roll.

Even the way the show is hung carries a certain conceptual weight. Nyeema Morgan is an African American female artist. Yet the paintings are hung salon style, a form of display promulgated by The Royal Academies of Art in France and England (est. 1648 and 1768 respectively). Of course, these European white male institutions excluded art by both women and nonwhite artists. Can this method of installation be casual coincidence?

The obfuscating of image with Plexiglas and gold leaf, as well as the truncation of language in these works, is a way of interrogating what exactly the message is behind each work. Other artists, notably Glen Ligon and Christopher Wool, have broken up words and phrases this way. In Ligon’s case, this disruption of legibility often has to do with challenging our accepted ideas about race. In Wool’s, we are asked to contemplate the accuracy of our perception, the license claimed by any one artistic movement, as well as how art is made.

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Morgan is posing so many questions in “Soft Power. Hard Margins.” – about what constitutes art, whether appropriation is always wrong, what the role of an artist should be, how art changes with context – that your head will spin. I encourage you to give in to the dizziness. It will make you feel incredibly alive.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com