

*NeoHooDoo:
Art for a Forgotten Faith*

An exploration of ritual and spirituality in contemporary American art

Exhibition on view at The Menil Collection June 27 to September 21, 2008

Exhibition Preview: Thursday, June 26, 2008, 6.30 – 8.30 pm

HOUSTON, June 23, 2008 – Co-organized by The Menil Collection and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* brings together a multigenerational group of North, South, and Central American artists who address the value of ritual in the artistic process and the broader implications of spirituality in contemporary art.

On view from June 27 to September 21, this exhibition of some 50 works (sculpture, photography, assemblage, video, performance, and other media) asserts that the drive towards spiritual practice is as relevant today in our ever-expanding global society as it has ever been. Artists have long engaged with ritualism to enrich their work, drawing on the traditions of shamans, griots and oral historians. *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, states

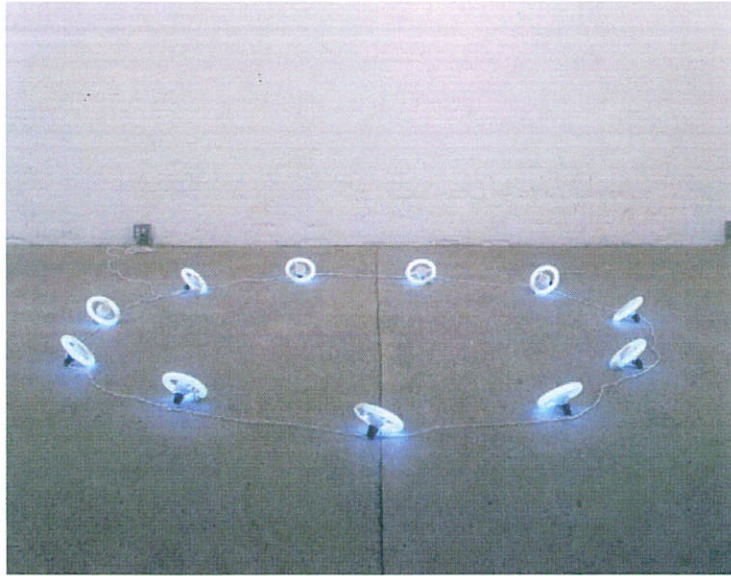
exhibition curator Franklin Sirmans, Menil curator of modern and contemporary art, “grew out of a desire to explore the multiple meanings of spirituality in contemporary art.”

Said Menil Director Josef Helfenstein: “The works in this extraordinary and important exhibition, rooted in a great diversity of rituals – and reflecting the role of ritual today – find special resonance here at the Menil, where the experience of art is itself a spiritual one.”

In the late 1960s poet Ishmael Reed adopted the 19th-century term “HooDoo” — referring to religious and cultural practices originating in pre-colonial West Africa — to discuss uses of ritualism in more contemporary works of literature and art. “Neo-HooDoo,” he states in his 1972 collection of poetry, *Conjure*, “believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest.” Reed looked to artistic expression as a pathway to explore cultural and political ideas beyond the confines of dominant belief systems and social norms. In his novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, for example, Reed incorporates innumerable, often conflicting cultural references into an



Byars, James Lee- *The Halo*



Marepe (Marcos Reis Peixoto) *Auréolas (Halo)*, 2004

intricate satire of race in America, freely blending conspiracy theory and U.S. history with elements of the Haitian religion Vodun (better known in American popular culture by its bastardized variant, Voodoo). His seminal poems, “The Neo-HooDoo Manifesto” and “The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,” delve even deeper into this artistic practice to demonstrate its vitality as an international, multicultural aesthetic that embraces spiritual creativity.

From Vancouver to Havana, Guatemala City, and Bahia, the artists in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* began using ritualistic practice as a means to recover a “lost” spirituality and to reexamine and reinterpret aspects of cultural heritage throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. True to the NeoHooDoo aesthetic, visual artists from across the Americas such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, José Bedia, Rebecca Belmore, Jimmie Durham, and Ana Mendieta have freely combined disparate materials and mediums to create a space where art and audience can interact unhindered by history or societal constraints or to emphasize the inability of such in certain circumstances. For these artists, ritual practice often emerges as a form of catharsis and political critique to approach issues such as race, gender, slavery, and colonization. This exhibition also will look at younger artists such as video artists Michael Joo and Regina José Galindo, who carry on many of these practices and themes decades later—reconfiguring the work of their predecessors into performative displays of ritual through film and gallery installations. In *Eclipse*, Sanford Biggers comments on the essence of art display itself, bisecting a wooden African sculpture and placing it on two pedestals. While the exhibition focuses heavily on three-dimensional pieces, the haunting archival imagery of Ernesto Pujol and a Polaroid triptych from María Magdalena Campos-Pons will further supplement NeoHooDoo themes using photography to examine the connections between the human form and colonial history.

As seen throughout the exhibition, these artists frequently incorporate everyday objects into their work—a gesture that reaches out to a broader audience. Items typically taken for granted (light bulbs, wine bottles, artificial flowers, piano keys) are repositioned in assemblages confronting themes of exploitation, genocide, and poverty that are so often lost in the disconnected world of contemporary global capitalism. In situating a vernacular aesthetic in an established gallery setting, these artists challenge widely held conceptions of “insider” and “outsider” art and allow the meaning of their work to fluctuate in relation to its context. Forgotten found objects such as the graffiti-tagged construction materials of William Cordova’s

house that Frank Lloyd Wright built for Atahualpa and the 53 pieces of discarded waste paper comprising Jimmy Durham's *A Street-level Treatise on Money and Work* are brought to the center of a dialogue on the destruction of native cultures. In *Deep Down I Don't Believe in Hymns*, Dario Robleto tackles American manifest destiny by taking a military-issued blanket and "infesting" it with hand-ground dust made from vinyl recordings of Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer" and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love."

NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by Arthur C. Danto, professor of philosophy at Columbia University; Greg Tate, cultural critic for the *Village Voice*; Robert Farris Thompson, professor of history at Yale University; Jen Budney, associate curator at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; and Julia Herzberg, art historian and curator specializing in Latin American art. The catalogue also will include an interview with Ishmael Reed by Franklin Sirmans and work by renowned poet Quincy Troupe. The fully illustrated, color catalogue will be available for purchase at the Menil Bookstore or at www.menil.org (144 pp. \$45.00).

NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith will be on view at the Menil from June 27 through September 21, 2008. From Houston, the exhibition will travel to P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center October 19, 2008 to January 26, 2009, then to The Miami Art Museum February 20, 2009 to May 24, 2009.

FREE PUBLIC PROGRAMS

GALLERY TALK AND BOOKSIGNING

Dario Robleto

Saturday July 12, 11.00 a.m. * Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

1.30 p.m. The Menil Collection

"On The Old, Weird America and NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith"

San Antonio artist Dario Robleto's consecutive tours of two Houston museum exhibitions in which he currently has work starts at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH)'s "The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art." At noon, box lunches will be available at CAMH, but they must be preordered (visit www.camh.org or phone 713-284-8257). Robleto resumes the gallery talks at The Menil Collection, discussing his work in ***NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith***. The program concludes with a book signing and refreshments on the Menil Bookstore deck. Tours are free. Transportation is not provided. Lunches and Menil refreshments must be purchased.

THE ARTIST'S EYE

Rosane Volchan O'Connor

Sunday, August 3, 3.00 p.m.

Gallery Talk on Marepe (Brazilian artist exhibiting in NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith)

Born in Rio de Janeiro to Russian descendants, Rosane Volchan O'Connor studied music at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Brussels and art at the Auderghem Academy. Working in Houston, she is developing a series of abstract monoprints on paper and gauze, installation lightboxes, and wire sculptures. Volchan O'Connor has exhibited her work in galleries and public spaces in Houston, New York, New Mexico, and Rio de Janeiro.

POETRY READING AND BOOKSIGNING

Quincy Troupe

Saturday, September 13, 6.00 p.m.

"NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith"

Poet, performer, biographer, and California's first poet laureate, Quincy Troupe is professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego. His seventeen books include *Miles: The Autobiography* (for which he won the American Book Award) and eight volumes of poetry; Troupe contributed the sweeping poem "An Art of Lost Faith" to the *NeoHooDoo* catalogue. His reading and conversation with Franklin Sirmans in The Menil Collection foyer will be followed by a book signing on the Menil Bookstore's deck.

The exhibition is generously supported by The Brown Foundation, Inc., The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Anonymous, William J. Hill, Beth and Rick Schnieders, Sara Dodd Spickelmier and Keith Spickelmier, Barbara and Charles Wright, Nina and Michael Zilkha, The Cullen Foundation, Houston Endowment, and the City of Houston.

**For further information and images,
please contact the press office, 713.525.9469, or press@menil.org**

**The Menil Collection, located within Houston's Museum District,
is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Admission and parking are free.**

Photo caption:

Byars, James Lee

The Halo

1985

Brass

86-1/2 diam x 86-1/2 diam x 8 inches

Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Cologne.

The Menil Collection, Houston

Marepe (Marcos Reis Peixoto)

Auréolas (Halo), 2004

Bulbs, electric wire, and sockets

Diam. 127 inches (322.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo

Photo credit: Adam Reich

Copyright Anton Kern Gallery