

Lava Thomas @ Rena Bransten

Posted on 28 September 2018.

by Mark Van Proyen



Freedom Song #2, 2018, tambourines, pyrographic calligraphy on leather, suede, grosgrain ribbon, mirrored acrylic disc, 72 x 145 x 2 inches

In moments of post-truth despair, I take small comfort in the idea that history itself is but a chronicle of selective misremembering, which refocuses attention on who is exercising such selectivity and why they are doing so. There are aids that help with this kind of refocusing, some being what might be called “the official record,” which is in fact a documentary archive of encounters between the apparati of state power and those who were and still are subjected to it. Almost everybody has some space assigned to their lives in such archives, but those individuals who have run

RENA BRANSTEN

GALLERY

afoul of the criminal (in)justice system have more than an equal share. Prior to the emergence of the post-9/11 surveillance state, this was even more the case, and old timey mug shots taken after police arrests remain the most common forms of visual evidence of those encounters.

Lava Thomas has made a timely return to those archives, and from them she has extracted “mug shot” images of 12 of the many African-American women who were arrested for their leadership roles in organizing the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. They were part of a cohort of more than 80 civil rights leaders indicted in February 1956 for breaking Alabama's anti-boycott laws. Parks, the most famous of the women Thomas chose to picture, was arrested twice: first on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, and then again, on February 22, 1956, as part of the larger group mentioned above. Parks' initial arrest



Rosa Parks, 2018, graphite and conté pencil on paper, 48 1/4 x 34 1/2 inches

sparked a 381-day boycott that was finally resolved by a Supreme Court ruling ordering the Montgomery City Transit operation to change its policy on the grounds that it violated the equal protection clause of 14th Amendment. The ruling should have been unnecessary because two

RENA BRANSTEN

GALLERY

years earlier, the SCOTUS had already overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal," which was the legal rationalization for segregationist policies that had been in effect since the end of the Civil War. And while it is worth noting that there were many African-American men who led and/or participated in the boycott, including Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr., the artist chose to focus on the women because their critical role in the boycott's success," she says, "is not widely known."

These large drawings (all 2018), rendered in graphite and conte pencil, take those mug shots as points of departure and go far beyond them. They do so in a variety of ways, one being their expansion to life-like scale. In some cases, such as Rosa Parks, the centrally placed half-body portrait of the original mug shot is re-cast at the lower left of the large drawing surface, allowing for the addition of a penumbral glow around the implicitly sainted figure. A similar glow is found surrounding the visages of Cora McHaney and Ms. A.W. West, Senior, the later casting her eyes above and beyond the gaze of the camera as if she were imagining a better world. In contrast, Lottie Green Varner looks accusatorily back at the camera, defiantly staring down its power to identify and label. Thomas' drawing technique is crisp and assured, but it also takes liberties with the source images. The sitters' garments bespeak winter weather, and Thomas exaggerates their fabric patterns in a way that emphasizes a kind of pictorial flatness that is belied by her attention to the anatomy of



L to R: Lottie Green and Mrs. A. W. West Senior, 2018, graphite and conté pencil on paper, each 48 1/4 x 34 1/2 inches

RENA BRANSTEN

GALLERY

faces and hands, where volumetric light-dark rendering provides levels of precise, even exaggerated detail that could not have been visible in the original photographs. The subtle and not-so-subtle transformations in Thomas' drawings achieve the powerful effect of reaffirming and elevating the personhood and dignity of their subjects. As a general rule, police photographs deny and subtly abolish the dignity of their subjects by fixing them to a graphic surface like so many specimens of real or alleged wrongdoing, as if to say, "don't be like this person." Thomas reverses this effect by showing how the dignity of a person can rise above the indignity of official accusation, in effect putting the law on a kind of esthetic trial. This is even true in the drawings of Ida Mae Caldwell and Jimmie L. Lowe, who both look back at



Ida Mae Caldwell, 2018, graphite and conté pencil on paper 48 1/4 x 34 1/2 inches. the viewer with downcast eyes and body postures that bespeak physical and psychic exhaustion. But tribulation notwithstanding, they are still undefeated, as Thomas' drawings make clear. In our own racially charged moment of racialized political rhetoric and controversies about widespread sexual assault, these works achieve a special resonance; but we should also remember that they reflect back on an older time before social justice activism was unburnished by hashtag adornments.

RENA BRANSTEN

GALLERY

The exhibition also contains two groups of other works by Thomas. One of these is the partial text of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 embossed into dark leather in the configuration of an American flag. The other are collections of tambourines (see above) arrayed across a wall, some covered in black leather, others sporting shiny, mirrored surfaces, and still others a bright, flat color. The tambourine works are interesting to look at, but the message they convey may be a bit too subtle—or insular—for many viewers. I take them to be clarion symbols of a call to righteous action articulated within the African-American community, specifically the African-American religious community where gospel music and the church remain to this day a locus of organized resistance. One need only replay any number of old gospel standards to hear the message of that instrument ringing.

#

Lava Thomas: "Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott" @ [Rena Bransten Gallery](#) through October 27, 2018.

About the Author:

Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries focus on satirizing the tragic consequences of blind faith placed in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for Art in America. His recent publications include: *Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein* (2011) and *Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction* (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read Alex Mak's December 9, 2014 interview, published on Broke Ass Stuart's Goddamn Website.