

go/figure

New work by Daniel Giles & Eliza Myrie

Wading through the murky mythos of cultural objects, Daniel Giles and Eliza Myrie's exhibition, *go/figure* examines the intricate historical narratives surrounding the collective memory and constructs of two artifacts. The Lesotho Brown diamond and a 19th century face jug are de/reconstructed, providing new forms of historicism. Central motifs of labor, commodification, and institutional memory are explored as the artists cipher research through their studio practice. Adeptly working across the mediums of sculpture, performance, drawing, printmaking, and video, both Giles and Myrie seek to answer longstanding questions surrounding black subjectivity.



Petrus Ramoaba with 601-carat diamond found in Lesotho

In the installation *diamond, diamond, graphite* (2014) Myrie unpacks the legend of Ernestine Ramoaba's discovery of the Lesotho Brown diamond. Ramoaba's alleged four day and four night journey by foot to deliver the diamond to a reputable dealer provided the object with an alluring history. Yet, despite the diamond's fame, Ramoaba herself is poorly documented. Myrie, seeking to reimagine the loss of Ramoaba's own visage within our collective consciousness, constructs her own diamond from a block of graphite¹. Formed

by burnishing the graphite against sheets of paper, the drawings resemble polished sheets of steel. *diamond, diamond, graphite* is

¹ Both graphite and diamonds are allotropes of carbon.

both a sculptural artifact of Myrie's labor, as well as vestiges of its process, providing a visualization of Ramoaba's negated image.

Discovered in 1967 within the Letseng diamond mine² in Lesotho, Africa, the Lesotho Brown Diamond was the seventh largest rough diamond unearthed, weighing 601 carats. Purchased by American jeweler Harry Winston, the diamond's discovery was heavily covered in American and British media. The public's fascination with the diamond was fueled not only by its significance as a luxury commodity but also by the exotification of Ramoaba herself. Today, Googling keywords such as "largest diamond" or "Lesotho Diamond" culls an array of black females modeling cleaved³ and polished diamonds. The results pose the questions of how black women's labor and personal narratives may enhance commodity goods. diamond, diamond is the result of Myrie's researched based process. Within the installation Myrie re-engages with Ramoaba's mythology, locating their shared tie as originators of a precious carbon form.



the devil at bay, face jugs were functional objects but were also used to delineate grave sites in American slave culture⁵. This specific jug was crafted by an unknown artist circa 1860 in the Edgefield District of South Carolina, a hotbed of this specific style of pottery, and was one of only a few objects created by or in the image of blacks

Like Myrie's conceptual excavation of the Lesotho Brown diamond, Daniel Giles's *500 faces for the wanderer* (2014) centers on the investigation of an object's historical lineage. During a visit to the American Folk Art Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago Giles's interest was piqued by a face jug (a type of pottery dating back to the 14th century⁴). Characteristically known for their grotesque countenance designed to keep

² "Brown Diamonds." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web.

³ The process of splitting a diamond against its natural grain.

⁴ "Face Jug." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web

⁵ McDowell, Jim. "Black Potter - Face Jugs." *Black Potter - Face Jugs*. N. p., n.d. Web

within American Folk Art Gallery. Giles uses the jug's objectivity, historical time frame, location, and personal intuition to explore parallels between the jug and the last documented ship to bring slaves from Africa to America, the *Wanderer*.

500 faces for the wanderer is multifaceted, centering around a book of loose leaf drawings housed within an glazed ceramic vessel -- the same material used to create traditional face jugs. The India ink drawings begin with a representational depiction of the face jug but as the book progresses each page becomes increasingly abstracted. Using the previous image as a source for the next, much like the childhood game telephone, the faces meld into themselves forming specter-like compositions.

When the *Wanderer* made its voyage across the Atlantic roughly 500 slaves were on board. When it reached the shores of America only 409 had survived. During the exhibition's opening reception Giles performs a reading of the book, holding each image over his face until he has exhausted the pile. The drawings then remain beneath their ceramic vessel housed from view. A cyanotype print accompanies the installation, acting as a representational blueprint for the series. In *500 faces for the wanderer*, Giles engages with the history of face jugs while seeking cross parallels between these objects and their makers.

go/figure culminates in a collaborative performance between Giles and Myrie, *untitled*. Filmed in an undescribed public location *untitled* depicts the artists dressing themselves in an entire wardrobe. Inspired by Myrie's witnessing of the puzzling action, the artists recreate the exaggerated layering as pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists pass. Not unlike the other works within the exhibition, Giles and Myrie provide an alternative visualization of our personal record, told through the clothing we perpetually acquire.

The works within *go/figure* provide visual documentation of Giles and Myrie's reimagining of the visual and sociocultural history of objects and people. Their own labor reflects the political nature of their studio practices and its transformative possibilities of institutionalized memory.

Meg Onli is a London-based writer whose work investigates the intricacies of black visual representations in America.

Daniel Giles is a Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist. His practice addresses the mediation and consumption of cultural mythologies and the permutation of social archetypes. Employing a range of practices including sculpture, installation and performance, Giles negotiates the spaces, tropes and artifacts of consumer display, public spectacle and political speech. He received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2011 and an MFA from Northwestern University in 2013. Giles has participated in residencies including High Concept Laboratories, ACRE, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Giles is currently an instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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eliza myrie currently lives and works in Chicago. Myrie was an Artist-In-Residence at the University of Chicago in 2012 and a resident at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2010. Myrie received her MFA from Northwestern University and her BA from Williams College. Select group exhibitions include the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago (2012); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2011); Zora Space, Brooklyn, New York (2011); Applied Arts, Chicago (2011); Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago (2010); Davidson Contemporary, New York (2010); and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois (2010). Myrie experiments with multiple forms of popular media, focusing on class, ethnicity, politics, and race. She manipulates images through video, sculpture, and drawing to create new narratives.

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Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center
1034 N. Milwaukee
Chicago, IL 60622

www.danielgiles.co

www.elizamyrie.com

www.rootsandculturecac.org