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Exhibition review

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Review: Two Exhibitions of Paintings by Beauford Delaney and Edvard Munch (Atlanta, High Museum of Art, 9 Feb-5 May 2002).

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orate almost every imaginable item, a direct outgrowth of President Kwame Nkrumah's use of kente as a unifying symbol for the new nation of Ghana in 1957. Despite occasional complaints of inauthenticity within Ghana itself, the cloth is not only produced in traditional strip weaving stitched together, but produced as printed designs on broadcloth looms.

Kente is now used in Ghana as a generalized symbol in popular painting (which here includes two memorable works imagining President Clinton wearing kente on his visit to Ghana). In the meantime, it has found a new life in the United States as an equally generalized symbol of African heritage. Valued for its vivid colors as much as for its emblematic value, the cloth's patterns have been imitated on American-made fashions, but seldom woven in the United States, even by Ghanaians. Following Ghanaian examples, kente has found its most dignified use in stoles worn by robed academicians or pastors, even if for a time its most obvious manifestations in street wear were considerably more informal.

The use of the cloth in Dorothy Taylor's 1997 art quilt paying homage to the Tuskegee Airmen is in many ways no more than an extension of the cloth's contemporary uses in its homeland, while Sonya S. Clark's combination of kente and American-flag rectangles is a creative re-interpretation of the theme. Emma Amos uses strip-woven cloth from Burkina Faso in *Into the Dangerous World I Leapt* as a margin for the painting, "to provide" as she says, "something for the [falling] figures to hold onto." To these contemporary African-American artists, the Carlos has added work by four Atlanta artists, as well as the results of a "Kente in Atlanta" survey investigating how kente has become an intrinsic part of African-American life.

K. Joy Ballard-Peters has incorporated actual kente into her autobiographical wall piece *The Me You See Is The Me You Want Me To Be*, but Kevin Cole only alludes to its patterns in *For Sisters Who Carry the Burden of Other Sistas (Marian Anderson)*, a painted wall sculpture that includes a small portrait of the legendary singer and containers holding papers that Cole's students wrote about Anderson's life. Likewise, Charlotte Riley-Webb's painting *Gullah Rhythms* contains fairly loose allusions to kente patterns in an homage to the African-American culture of the coastal islands of

Georgia and South Carolina. In their separate ways, both artists illustrate how kente has become more a metaphorical reference than a literal clothing accessory.

By contrast, Jim Alexander's photographs document the actual uses of kente clothing at a wide variety of events in Atlanta over the years. His visual documentation is supplemented by wall texts that bear quotations solicited from an equally wide variety of community members regarding their opinions regarding the cloth. A vendor at the 2001 Atlanta Caribbean Festival remarks, "Kente is out of fashion," but another vendor counters that "It cannot be out of style...it is very much alive." Or, as the assistant pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church puts it, "Kente is a way of claiming an African identity, not a Ghanaian identity..... Pan-Africanism was born on the hulls of the slave ships."

Jerry Cullum
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ATLANTA

The worsening predicament facing many public exhibition spaces has much to do with why the High Museum's exhibitions of paintings by **BEAUFORD DELANEY** and **EDVARD MUNCH** (both February 9—May 5, 2002) are so pleasantly surprising.

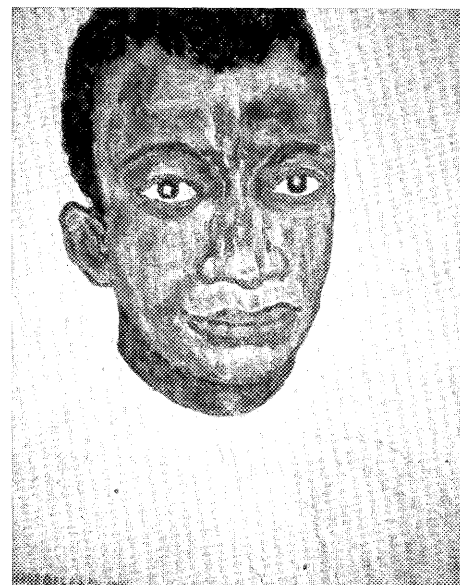
Large not-for-profit organizations often find it easier to raise money for construction than for operating expenses because buildings automatically give lasting recognition to their patrons' generosity. Consequently, as governments have retreated from helping museums with their day-to-day costs, directors have found themselves less and less able to afford the staff or exhibitions appropriate to their facilities.

This desperate state has spawned a parade of shows promising much and delivering little. When big exhibitions are mounted, they tend to recycle tried and true crowd pleasers (one more time for Monet's water lilies or Degas' dancers). More often, museums try to palm off exhibits done on the cheap as Earth-shattering events: previously unexhibited scrapbooks that put the "crap" in "scrapbook"; first-ever retrospectives of hitherto ignored artists who turn out to have been overlooked for good reason; shows of fifty paintings by Famous Painter X "and his circle" comprising one painting by the marquee artist and forty-nine pictures by artists who "may have" gone to the same art school or "probably" met him at the local bar.

Cynicism comes easily in this context, and a jaded look crossed my face when I heard that the High Museum's spring shows would be (1) lesser known late paintings by Edvard Munch and (2) an attempt to bring to Beauford Delaney's work "the attention that it deserves" more than twenty years after Delaney's death. Both bodies of work, I suspected, merited their obscurity.

Okay, so I was wrong. Twice. At least I'm big enough to admit it.

I don't quite agree with the High's characterization of **AFTER THE SCREAM: THE LATE PAINTINGS OF EDVARD MUNCH** as "a revela-



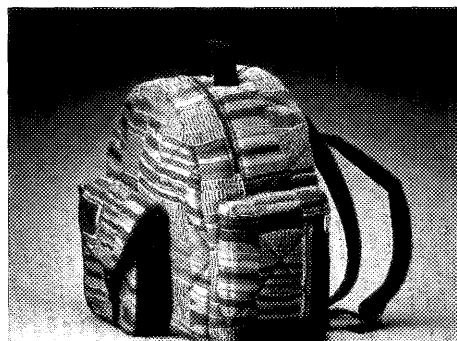
Beauford Delaney, *James Baldwin*, 1965, oil on canvas, 30 by 21 inches (collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Gift of the Estate of Beauford Delaney).

tion and an amazement," but it is worth seeing. These 62 paintings from Oslo's Munch-Museet demonstrate a range of styles, palettes and genres that put considerable pressure on the widespread conception of the painter of *The Scream* as a dour, anguished soul perpetually tortured by existential angst.

Not that these works are exactly jolly. An image like *Jealousy in the Garden* (1916-20)—with its dark colors, vaguely threatening evening setting and otherworldly figure pressed up against the picture plane—certainly is consistent with the depressive view of our interior lives that we generally associate with Munch. On the other hand, the *Starry Night* pictures from the 1920s are more tranquil than we'd expect. Structured around a prow-shaped balcony in the foreground, this series invites us to look out over a city during a calm winter night. The light from the bright stars overhead reflect off of the snow-covered rooftops just below us, gently dispelling the darkness and turning the potentially gloomy northern winter night into a peaceful, alluring landscape.

However, since the *Starry Night* pictures use the same dark palette as the more familiar Munch images, they depart less from what we expect of Munch than do landscapes like *The Haymaker I* (1916). This depiction of a lone figure scything through a field of hay on a cloudy but bright afternoon displays an interest in outdoor light and rural settings that owes more to Impressionism at its most serene than to Expressionist gloom.

If the publicity for the Munch show might give us pause, then the pitch for the concurrent Beauford Delaney exhibition sends even more wrong signals. Not only does this exhibit concern an "overlooked" painter who died over twenty years ago, but its title seems gratuitous: because the African-American painter Delaney used a lot of yellow in his painting, the show is called **THE COLOR YELLOW**—instead of *The Color Purple*, which is a novel by an African-American writer. Get it?



Anonymous, Backpack constructed of handwoven Asante strips, rayon, cotton, synthetic fabric, padding, zipper, plastic and metal (photo courtesy of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History).

Unfortunately for quick-draw cynics like myself, this allusion (which, oddly, goes unremarked in the catalog even though the phrase “the color yellow” turns up regularly) is at least somewhat warranted. Alice Walker’s book relates the story of two African-American sisters who, despite the hardships they witness and experience, retain their sense of hope by focusing on the wondrous things that God seems to have put on Earth for that reason—one of which is pure, purposeless beauty. “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it,” Shug, one of Walker’s characters, says. “People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.”

The catalog and media releases for the Delaney show ascribe a similar value to the yellow—or, more accurately, yellows—in Delaney’s symbolic system. And the bright (in tone and achievement) portraits, cityscapes and abstractions support this argument. Rich abstract paintings like *Composition 16* (1954) and *Autumn* (1965) seem to fill the room with the swirling light generated by their slightly painterly and subtly variegated surfaces. This glowing haze reappears in Delaney’s portraits of African-American cultural icons like James Baldwin, Marian Anderson (both 1965) and, most hauntingly, Ella Fitzgerald (1968), where it is less a backdrop than a strangely compelling field of visual energy surrounding the sitters.

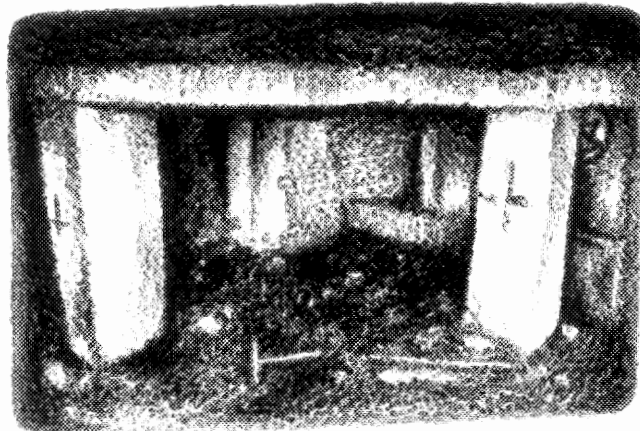
See both these shows—but remove that resigned look from your face first.

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ATLANTA

New York-based artist **JENNIFER RAY** manages to wrest from the true crime genre seemingly incongruous elements—both the lyrical and the lurid—in her varied take on this macabre cultural fixation. “True Crime” at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (January 25–March 23, 2002) features eight delicate pencil on paper illustrations drawn from photographs seen in the pages of true crime novels, and five digitally manipulated true crime paperback covers. By filtering both the drawings and the paperback covers through the computer, and rendering both in the physical dimensions of the true crime novel, Ray comments upon the mass-produced ubiquity and also the pulpy, poor reproductions and degraded quality of this genre. Textured paper mimics the graininess of the cheaply printed halftone photos that are the juiciest morsel of every true crime book, while the worn, tattered effect created in this computer mediation doubly emphasizes this literature’s lowly status.

Ray’s ethereal, enigmatic drawings lure the viewer in and yearn to be deciphered. An open car trunk containing an ominous bundle, a hole in the freshly dug earth, a basement or underpass littered with Satanic graffiti, a door leading out into the danger-thick, inky night—these



Jennifer Ray, *Crime Scene*, 2002, graphite on paper 6 inches by 8 inches (photo courtesy the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center).

opening, beckoning spaces become equivalent to the basements and attics of gothic literature in Ray’s portentous drawings. Ray’s characteristic storybook lyrical drawing style, which so often recalls children’s picture books and the most innocent of genres, proves a tart, uneasy match to this subject matter of the most nightmarishly adult of subjects. And certainly the Jeffrey Dahmers, Ted Bundys and Richard Ramirez of our true crime storylines are as close to a shared literature as *The Canterbury Tales*. Aesop’s fables or *The Odyssey* were for another age. A certain rudimentary storytelling occurs in Ray’s drawings, familiar to any reader of such pulp nonfiction, or bloodshot viewer of Court TV: the body in the trunk, the Satanic teens, the courtroom appearance, the disappointingly ordinary, potbellied criminal bound with handcuffs. We know these people, and we know these crime scenes—these are the myths and legends of our own modern consciousness, “True Crime” asserts.

At the same time, Ray’s manipulated book covers advertising “Eight Pages of Stunning Photos!” and “Killer!” repel with their shockingly salacious carny-like barks inciting literary rubbernecking. No image better conveys the mix of enlightenment and prurience the true crime junkie seeks, than the book cover Ray has boiled down to its barest essence, titled simply “Evil!” with the loaded *Penthouse* magazine endorsement below: “Sensational!” The cut-rate advertiser’s overheated exclamation point abounds in these book covers, the cheap and shoddy come on, as one book promises “affairs, fast living, fancy cars, money.” By stripping away the extraneous details of the cover art and

retaining the most sensational text, heated, violent graphics of jabbing red shards and images of a length of rope knotted into a ligature, Ray emphasizes the sense of grotesque dark comedy in the genre’s visual conventions.

Ray retains some of the unique markings of the books themselves: the cracked and worn, faded covers that give these works found at a jumble sale or thrift store, an unsavory physical presence—a sullied, used dimension that invites a comparison to pornography as a comparably consumed and then trashed genre—something not left displayed on one’s home library shelves. The lipstick-shiny paperstock, as lurid as neon, and a heavy metal band-style lettering also emphasize the sordid, pop, grimy dimensions of this reprobate literary genre.

That sensationally pimped promise of evil is a summation of our own desire to somehow understand the concept of our own mortality, and the thirst to comprehend the incomprehensible, which Ray’s elusive, mystery-laden drawings taunt. A great philosophical chasm opens up between these works, as the covers promise to deliver the goods, and the actual delivered goods—offered up in the particularities of crime scenes and bound, dead bodies—resist our understanding.

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