

Bennet, Lennie, "Artist William Villalongo collaborated with University of Tampa," TAMPA BAY TIMES, 23 March 2013.

Tampa Bay Times

Artist William Villalongo collaborates with University of Tampa

BY LENNIE BENNETT

Times Art Critic

TAMPA



William Villalongo poses in front of his work *The Painting Lesson* in the Scarfone/Hartley Gallery at the University of Tampa. Black women are the subject of this piece as they are in his other works, which are on display through Friday. Villalongo has been collaborating on a project at the University of Tampa's STUDIO-f. SCOTT KEELER | Times

To create good new art, an artist has to know a lot about old art. Then use that knowledge not to emulate but to extend. And, of course, have the technical chops to make the work. That's how I approach contemporary art.

If those criteria are applied, William Villalongo is on a strong trajectory.

He was recently at the University of Tampa to collaborate on a series of prints at its STUDIO-f, which are on view in the university's Scarfone/Hartley Gallery along with a group of new paintings.

Those paintings are the best indicators of Villalongo's talent. They're cerebral and sensual both conceptually and materially. Narratives unfold that combine multiple references that are familiar with strange twists.

"My work is about historical twisting. Modernism and Colonialism and the complex nature of how they relate to each other that I don't think is talked about," Villalongo says.

He's referring to a European art movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries called primitivism in which images are appropriated from ancient and non-Western cultures. Pablo Picasso, for example, used African masks. Often, the artist glorified a less sophisticated culture, as Paul Gauguin did in his paintings of Tahiti.

"I love it, but they show us a power dynamic," he says, in which the female is exoticized — sometimes even exploited, some would say of Gauguin's females, for example — by white male artists. So instead of celebrating these simpler worlds, as was the artists' intention, they patronized them, as the larger society did.

"It's problematic and interesting, and I wanted to think about how to use it and tell a story."

His subjects are black women because "women are more interesting. And I think this is fundamentally a woman's story throughout history."

So he paints women in exotic worlds that we enter visually through portals made of flocked velvet cut into silhouettes of lush foliage. The effect is of emerging from a dark forest and discovering a sunny glade from another planet. They are pastoral paintings, a genre depicting idealized landscapes with frolicking inhabitants that began in ancient Rome and Greece. Gauguin's Tahitian paintings are considered pastorals substituting a primitive setting for a classical one.

And now we have Villalongo's *Zebra*, in which a group of black women gathered at a river look on with expressions ranging from horror to disgust as another is birthed, fully formed, by a zebra. Bizarre, yes. But full of references including Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Paul Cezanne's *The Bathers* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. And that zebra, a stand-in for Africa, which birthed many of the inspirations for modern art. *Bathing Nymph* follows a similar format with a nubile woman bathing in a river. In the black flocking that silhouettes the scene are profiles of two men hiding in the shadows, looking on voyeuristically. We, by extension, are also voyeurs. It recalls the Biblical story of Susanna and the elders, an early exploitation narrative.

In many of his works, Villalongo puts masks on the faces of the women, another nod to modern art's connection to non-Western societies. But the twist is that instead of resembling African masks, they're fashioned as works of modern art, some even as direct homages to specific artists. Masks also represent the duality that informs his art.

As he says, "There are always two things going on: the one you can see and the one you can't see. That's what interests me."

So a mask allows for a transformation into another persona. It can also act as a spiritual or ritualistic portal to another state of consciousness.

That idea leads to the prints that he created at University of Tampa. They repeat some visual imagery of the paintings — the flocking and silhouettes, for example — but they

take his female subjects into a metaphysical world of black holes into which they are sucked and then emerge altered.

These works are easy to see as interesting and unusual. They ask more of us in looking backward and taking us forward.

Lennie Bennett can be reached at lbennett@tampabay.com or (727) 893-8293.



Artist William Villalongo examines one of his unfinished silk-screen prints, this one showing the brain inside a woman's head, at STUDIO-f at the University of Tampa. SCOTT KEELER | Times



Master printer Carl Cowden III pulls ink across the screen to make one of Villalongo's prints as the artist watches. SCOTT KEELER | Times



Villalongo holds a print in process as part of the STUDIO-f collaboration. Dorothy Cowden, director of Scarfone/Hartley Gallery, looks on. SCOTT KEELER | Times