

Peterson, Nina. "Myths & Migrations: Review," *Denver Art Review Inquiry + Analysis*, 3 December 2024.



William Villalongo: Myths and Migrations, organized by Grinnell College Museum of Art and currently on view at the CU Art Museum in Boulder, includes collages, video, sound, and sculptural works made during the past two decades. The exhibition challenges a white, male, colonialist gaze central to Euro-American histories of art. [1] Interrogating the technologies and techniques that structure and facilitate this gaze, including scientific tools such as the telescope and microscope as well as art-making itself, William Villalongo uses collage and (re)framing to emphasize the presence and agency of Black being across time and throughout artistic movements and styles.

Installed high on the wall above the entrance to the exhibition, *Zero Gravity 2* (2018) speaks to how the artist engages Black being. A collage made with cut velour paper and acrylic paint, *Zero Gravity 2* presents a recumbent Black figure, simultaneously embodied and disintegrated, with extended legs and a bent arm emerging from a swirl of abstract organic shapes.

Cut from the black velour paper, the shapes evoke shards of bones, leaves, and twigs, and reveal shadows that dance across the white surface beneath the cut paper. A small, half-moon-shaped eye blinks amidst what might be thought of as "swirlons"—whirling conglomerations of active matter that defy certain laws of physics. [2] A wall text explains that the figure "floats in space—dreamlike, liminal, ill-defined—much like accumulated but endlessly varied notions of what it is to be Black in the world."

Black being, for the artist, is multiplicitous, resilient, and transforming rather than a prescriptive identity category or fixed metaphysical state. As presented by the exhibition, Black being resonates with what critical theorist and Black studies scholar Fred Moten has poeticized as a *process* that involves the "unending remediation" of the historical trauma of enslavement that reduced Black folks to the surface of their skin. [3] In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, scholar of African American art Tiffany E. Barber describes the artist's methods of creation and resultant artworks as ways to "create a world where Black bodies are more than flesh." [4]

Collage is an apt method for resisting impositions of identity and being. As a mode of creation, it involves the recombination of supposedly set images and ideas. And it shows itself as a process—we see the meticulous action of using a blade to excise material and to form negative spaces in the artwork's final form. Cutting paper, an act of removal, creates a negative space to form positive space; this is a protective gesture, one that defies the gaze that seeks to fix Black being and to limit its infinite possibilities for existence and creation.

A visual motif recurs throughout the exhibition: the artist emphasizes the sight of female figures using modern paintings cut with dual holes that encircle the women's eyes. The

canvas-glasses hybrids enframe the eyes of women depicted in erotic magazines and ethnographic publications as well as those painted as stand-ins for female figural types in Western painting traditions (such as the nymph and the odalisque). These frames return the white, male gaze that structured many of the artworks now firmly ensconced in the Western art historical canon. In the artworks *Jubilee* and *Rhombus*, both from 2010, Villalongo presents these figures in the acts of joyful making. They are active agents in the creation of artworks—not passive objects of desire.

Examining how the effects of the white, colonial gaze persist across time, *Stocks and Bonds (Blue)* from 2012 links the history of the slave auction to the history of modern art. The work depicts a Black woman standing upon a Luba fertility stool—a type of object created for royal use by peoples indigenous to the areas of what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is entrapped in stocks, a “torture device developed in medieval times and often used at slave auctions,” as a text panel explains. Canvases painted in the abstract styles of artists including Mark Rothko and Franz Kline stack on top of each other to make up the torture device. The confined woman contorts her face in a snarl, her eyes fixed on the viewer.

Her snarling stare is an act of resistance, however limited, against the brutality of what scholar of African American history Saidiya Hartman calls the “economy of enjoyment” at work in the spectacle of the auction block. [5] The structure of viewership in the slave auction involved audiences and enslavers deriving pleasure from gawking at an event in which physical violence brought about the domination and subjugation central to enslavement. This figure’s snarling stare is a performance of defiance, a facial expression that rejects and returns the ocular violence of the slave trade. [6]

Linking the spectacle of the auction block with the viewership involved in the apprehension of modern art, *Stocks and Bonds* shows the legacies of this visual and financial economy. These gazes commodify and objectify the Black body, rendering it hypervisible while denying the subjectivity of the actual African people who created the objects that inspired modern artists.

In addition to how the white, colonial gaze works in the spectacle of the auction block, Villalongo’s practice reimagines the use of technologies entwined with the expansion of the slave trade by European nations. [7] According to the artist, quoted in an exhibition placard, the composition of *Specimen* structures a viewing experience similar to that of looking through a microscope or a telescope. *Specimen* (2023) is a collage of printed butterflies and geodes that swirl within the circular piece of paper. Two cupped hands, palms up, bracket an abstract, ink-washed shape that looks like water sloshing in a glass vessel or an ocean scene.

In this work, the object of the scientific gaze looks back. Two eyeballs, no lids to veil their stare, hover below the cupped hands—another motif in the exhibition. Composed in a gesture of both receptivity and giving, the hands are the center from which the butterflies emerge as they flutter around the iridescent black background of the paper. We peek at an infinitude that exceeds the confines of Enlightenment-era technologies, themselves developed concurrently with philosophies that excluded Africans from the category of the human. [8] The butterflies suggest transformation and resilience in spite of these systems that sought to limit Black potential.

The ideas of philosopher Sylvia Wynter and geographer Kathryn Yusoff are important in Villalongo’s practice, including Wynter’s articulation of transplantation—a method of asserting geographical claims in the wake of enslavement’s brutal displacement. [9] In an artist’s statement, Villalongo explains that in his recent work, he is “transplanting the inherent and

persistent fragility that surrounds black life within the symbolic languages of healing, power, metamorphic and geologic transformation.” [10]

Collage enables this transplantation. Bringing together art history and critical Black studies, in this exhibition William Villalongo offers a mode of vision that resists the determinative power of the white, male, colonial gaze and opens space for a continually shifting enactment of Black being.

[1] The gaze is an empowered mode of looking in which the perceiver is in a position of dominance over the object of looking. The gaze is objectifying, even when it is a person who is caught in the looker’s sights. Martiniquain psychoanalytic theorist Frantz Fanon explained the white, colonial gaze as a mechanism of imposing and fixing identity and of constraining Black subjects’ possibilities for moving and existing in the world. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), 109.

https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon_Frantz_Black_Skin_White_Masks_1986.pdf. For film theorist Laura Mulvey, the male gaze is apparent in the structures and conventions of narrative cinema, which rely on a binary between an active male looker and a passive woman, displayed as an object of erotic desire. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 62-63.

[2] Stephanie Pappas, “Meet the swirion, a new kind of matter that bends the laws of physics,” *Live Science*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.livescience.com/swirionic-matter-unusual-behavior.html>.

[3] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xiii.

[4] Tiffany E. Barber “Deep Cuts,” in *William Villalongo: Myths and Migrations* (Grinnell College Museum of Art, 2024), 15.

[5] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-27.

[6] In Hartman’s analysis, the transgression of decorum through parody may resist domination and subjection. For example, Hartman locates one instance in an archival account of an enslaved woman Sukie, who momentarily quashes the pleasure of her enslavers with a joke about having *vagina dentata*. Sukie’s parody caustically exaggerates complicity in a sexualized system of dehumanization in order to reject her objectification, even as the brutality of slavery is beyond overwhelming. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 41.

[7] Sam Kean, “Historians expose early scientists’ debt to the slave trade.” *Science*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.science.org/content/article/historians-expose-early-scientists-debt-slave-trade>.

[8] For a critique of Western Enlightenment humanism, see Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 282.

[9] For a discussion of how Wynter’s idea of transplantation might be reckoned with as a form of historical accountability, see Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 88. [10] William Villalongo, “Artist Statement,” artist’s website, accessed November 21, 2024. <https://villalongostudio.com/>.