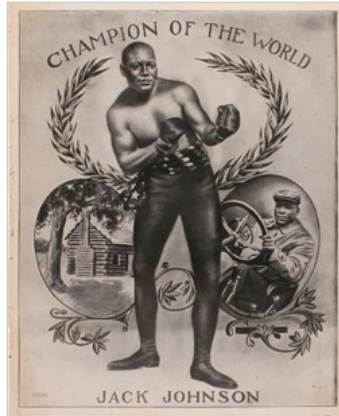


## review



*Champion of the World Jack Johnson, Brandt & Acheible, photolithograph [21 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.], 1909. From The Menil Collection, Houston. Photograph by Paul Hester*

### LESSONS FROM BELOW: OTABENGA JONES & ASSOCIATES AT THE MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON

by Jennifer King

First, a confession: I'm getting tired of shows conceived as artist-curated (but museum-initiated) "interventions." What was once a powerful means of critique has become, in so many cases, numbingly formulaic. Letting an artist have free reign in collections storage does not guarantee a meaningful—or even interesting—exhibition. For every uninspiring show that claims to avail itself of "the artist's eye," or to follow in the tradition of Fred Wilson's masterful but peerless "Mining the Museum," the notion of institutional critique seems to go a little more corporate.

That said, the Menil Collection's "Lessons from Below" is an encouraging exception to the trend. Despite the museum's promotion of the show in exactly the terms cited above, the artists involved—Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus, Kenya Evans, and Robert Pruitt, who together form the collective Otabenga Jones & Associates—overcome the limitations of this genre of exhibition, creating an environment that is reliably antagonistic, yet unexpectedly moving.

Near the entrance of the exhibition are two posters from 1970—one advocating for the release of then-imprisoned academic-turned-activist Angela Davis, and one advertising a lecture by Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) at Texas Southern University in Houston. The strong character of these posters—both featuring proud portraits of their (sometimes controversial) subjects—seems to anticipate the defiant tone of OJ & A's three-point mission statement, provided in the exhibition brochure: "1.) TO TEACH THE TRUTH TO THE YOUNG BLACK YOUTH 2.) TO EXTEND THE PARAMETERS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC AFRO-DIASPORIC AESTHETIC 3.) TO MESS WIT' WHITEY." That both Davis and Baraka were, and continue to be, active as educators is fitting here, considering the exhibition also doubles as a classroom/library in which the collective is hosting six weeks of lectures by invited speakers.

Mostly culled from the Menil's holdings of Black Americana, African art, modern art, and photography, and interspersed with objects from the artists' own collections, the exhibition combines fine art and popular artifacts from across the history of black visual culture. The range of the museum-owned works—for example, photographs by Helen Levitt, Roy Decarava, and James Van Der Zee, a bronze portrait head of Paul Robeson, undated maps of Africa, a 19th-century painting titled *Head of a Moroccan Black*—speaks to the principles of the museum's founders, Dominique and John de Menil, who were not only spectacular patrons of the arts, but liberal activists ardent in their support of civil rights. Viewing the exhibition, one cannot help but recall the Menil Foundation's multi-volume study *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (1976)—a project premised on the belief that understanding the history of representation is crucial to combating racial prejudice.

What makes OJ & A's work successful is that it avoids the tropes of cynicism and irony typical of such interventions. Although the artists strike an aggressive tone in their brochure text ("We will step into spaces that do not belong to us and command those spaces"), the installation does not mock or deride the museum or its visitors. The absence of text panels or didactic labels in the gallery suggests the artists' trusting viewers to arrive at their own conclusions. On a recent visit to the exhibition, two visitors were doing just that—looking at works, taking notes, and browsing the selection of books available for reading.

While the largest wall of the exhibition—a salon-style hanging dominated by photographs, prints, drawings, and ephemera—is broadly instructive, it is the glass cases installed with objects that were, for me, most compelling. Here, by placing items representative of childhood—toy action figures of black superheroes, a card set of "Famous Black People," printed lunchboxes, books, records—alongside objects like African sculptures, modernist artworks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. memorabilia, the artists make a statement that is playful but earnest: one cannot underestimate the power of icons, particularly on young people. Finally, by recuperating the intellectual and political activism of the de Menils—an aspect of the museum's history too easily forgotten—the four artists of Otabenga Jones & Associates create a lesson that is not just effective, but surprisingly poignant.

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