



Exhibition Review: On the Road Series Debut Stuns at Jenkins Johnson Gallery

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By Audra Lambert

Vertiginous folds of fabric climb in an ambitious ascent, weaving the identity of its creator into every stitch. Basil Kincaid's voluminous "Love As Patient As the Hillside" (2018) anchors Jenkins Johnson's spacious first-floor gallery space for "On the Road: Caroline Kent, Basil Kincaid and Esau McGhee". Curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah, this exhibition, on view through Jan 12, marks the first installment in the exhibition series by the curator. Referencing Jack Kerouac's influential *On the Road*, Ossei-Mensah applies the concept of documenting a cross-country journey toward charting the contemporary African-American experience – beginning here with a specific lens on the Midwest. The cohort of artists on view in Jenkins Johnson's debut "On the Road" work in St. Louis and Chicago, and have lived in and worked throughout the region.



(L to R) Basil Kincaid, *Peace of the Hillside*, 2018, framed aluminum dye and emulsion print, 16 x 30 inches, *A Land Our Own*, 2018, framed aluminum dye and emulsion print, 16 x 24 inches, *Love As Patient As the Hillside*, 2018

"Approaching Kerouac's *On the Road*, on this cross-country art journey I found myself asking: where are the black and brown bodies?" Ossei-Mensah, Senior Curator at Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit (MOCAD), reflects on his curatorial approach leading up to "On The Road". In introducing the exhibit and its artists, he mentions being inspired by works by Derrick Adams and Ebony G. Patterson who exalt black bodies, portraying these figures in states of leisure and celebration. These scenes recurred to the curator as he initially viewed works by St. Louis-based Basil Kincaid. Standing in front of Kincaid's portraits of a picnic, family members relaxing on the grass in the sun on the same quilt on view in "On the Road", Ossei-Mensah recounts Kincaid's emphasis on incorporating his family's history and his own personal memories into these quilted works. This soft sculpture

anchors the space, the folds of the fabric softly outlining an absent human figure, anticipating the edges of a subtle form. Kincaid's works both reveal and conceal the human form and memories, his own and those in his immediate social circle. "Kincaid creates quilted works as portraits of his own family and markers of memory, and his collages and drawings taken in consideration alongside these quilted works express a variety of modalities. It's important for audiences to be exposed to the breadth of his practice," Ossei-Mensah elaborates.

Nearby mixed-media works masterfully contort inside their custom-built frames, wrestling against the weight of anticipated right angles with their calculated curves and bends. Wooden frames and compositions both bear witness the masterful range of Chicago-based Esau McGhee's practice. Working from his studio in East Garfield Park, McGhee takes his initial training in photography through the filter of working as a street artist to construct complex



(L to R) Esau McGhee, *Untitled Unintentional Phallic Monument #2*, screen print and ink on archival paper, in birch frame, 39.5 x 19.5 inches, Basil Kincaid, *Rest: In Felt Silence*, 2018, framed aluminum dye and emulsion print, 20 x 30 inches, Esau McGhee, *Untitled Environmental Portrait #9*, 2017, found paper, screen print, and ink on archival paper, 24 x 24 inches

compositions, some with a graffiti mark-making tool, in vivid patterns and hues. Applying an intimate repetition of found pattern, McGhee combines a balanced approach to construction and composition to exquisite effect. These collages flatten notions of ownership: referencing found imagery as a diagram of public space, McGhee integrates patterns, colors and printed materials found within the mass-produced and the everyday. McGhee observes, "This collective experience that we all share with public spaces... it's not my space, it's not your space, it's really ours: it's going through an evolution as dictated by us."

Approaching Jenkins Johnson's lower gallery space, Ossei-Mensah expounds on his initial approach when formulating this inaugural iteration of "On the Road". "As a curator, it's key to find ways to challenge myself to not subscribe to a particular style," reflects Ossei-Mensah. We take a moment to gaze

around at the show before he continues, "As a project space and commercial gallery, Jenkins Johnson is the perfect place to mount "On the Road" – I'm thankful that they were willing to take a risk on a show of artists whose work audiences here may have never encountered, providing a platform for these artists in an accessible, domestic space where diverse audiences can feel a sense of belonging."

Ruminating on the importance of crafting inter-regional dialogues with diverse artists whose work may not (yet) be featured on Artforum or headlining Christie's auctions, Ossei-Mensah presents a measured viewpoint on why he began this series with Midwestern artists. In addition to his role building a platform for artists from across the region (and the US) at MOCAD in Detroit, he observes the area is full of sometimes overlooked talent. "Artists in the Midwest are making interesting work, and can be diamonds in the rough whose work merits new platforms. These are artists whose work shouldn't lie undiscovered: there is a narrative guiding each artist's body of work. These artists are all committed to their practice – what they will produce next will be truly remarkable."



(L to R) Caroline Kent, *To Summon the Objects in the Room, Pt. 2*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches and *Alterior Motives*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches

The final gallery yields exquisite works by artist Caroline Kent, whose work spans text and abstraction. Ossei-Mensah identifies what first caught his eye about her abstract works: the forms placed within a black ground. "Using a black ground in these works asserts her position," notes Ossei-Mensah. Our conversation centers on the relative dearth of black women artists working in abstraction, and how by foregrounding these works within a black space the artist subtly re-oriens the context of these compositions. Meanwhile, two text-based pieces nearby include the artist's own written work, placed in dialogue with monochrome hues of paint created

by the artist's finger marks. Aspects of Kent's identity intermingle in these works, while her larger abstract compositions evoke disparate actions and forms. Taken comprehensively, Kent's body of work absorbs a multitude of influences while incorporating her own precise palette: what Ossei-Mensah refers to as a "a pictorial index she sees built into the world of gestures around her." We stop in front of two works by Kent, "Carmicheal and Eloise" (2016) and "I Would Call..." (2016), before Ossei-Mensah continues. "Kent's work demonstrates her commitment to pushing the limits of abstract language, with her focus on building a syntax and toolbox: a reservoir of forms and colors placed upon a black ground. When taken in context with her text-based works there exists a variety of aspects in her practice, a remarkable plurality."

Reflecting on Kent's practice, Ossei-Mensah inadvertently observes the power propelling "On the Road" forward. "This work pushes the visual language to its breaking point," he observes. Works on view by Kincaid, Kent and McGhee push the envelope, breaking boundaries across mediums in a well-balanced survey of formidable contemporary artists living and working in the Midwest.