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The Underground Museum's New Exhibit Combines Contemporary Work With Centuries-Old African Art

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BY CATHERINE WAGLEY



The Oracle, foreground, at the Underground Museum

Compton-bred hip-hop bard Kendrick Lamar is singing in his catchy, laid-back way: "All my life I want money and power / Respect my mind or die from lead shower." A lithe guy who's high on life, or maybe high on something else, is strutting along the L.A. River. He is shirtless, jeans sagging enough to show his bright blue boxers. He appears in the free-form, two-channel film made by Kahlil Joseph to accompany music from Lamar's memoirlike album *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Two projectors shine in-tandem imagery on two perpendicular screens in the first gallery of the Underground Museum, an art space on Washington Boulevard in West Adams.

You see two views of blue-boxer guy at once: One screen mainly shows his shadow on the concrete, while the other shows him moving along the edge of the frame. Across the room, in a specially constructed, closetlike enclave, *The Master of Tonj*, a wood figure made in Sudan sometime in the 1800s, looks on. *The Master* has his eyebrows raised, his mouth in an o-shape and, though he has had this expression for a few centuries by now, it's hard not to feel

he's reacting to what is on-screen. "I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower / So I can fuck the world for 72 hours," Lamar sings, and blue-boxers guy suddenly reappears in a cul-de-sac at night with a bottle of vodka, surrounded by friends, lost in the moment. *The Master* looks amused.

Joseph's film and the 19th-century sculpture both are part of "The Oracle," an exhibition at the Underground Museum in West Adams named after figures historically made to communicate with spirits or ancestors. The reason two such disparate objects ended up in the same room is that Noah Davis, the artist who runs the 2-year-old Underground Museum out of his former studio, met Jeremiah Cole, a collector who keeps as low a profile as possible but has a passion for rare African art. Davis' mother met Cole first, because she bought a drum from him, then told him he had to meet her son. The collector invited Davis to his storage unit, which, in Davis' words, was "like entering King Tut's tomb" — it overflowed with fantastic objects. Because Cole liked the idea of giving people in the West Adams neighborhood



access to art from his collection, art they would typically have to go out of their way and pay museum admission to see (the Underground Museum does not charge and occasionally leaves its doors wide open), he lent Davis five figures to show alongside contemporary art.

Davis' goal has always been to keep a lower art-world profile and cater to the neighborhood. The museum opened with a show called *Imitation of Wealth*, which replicated the kind of modern and contemporary masterpieces that the unindoctrinated can find alienating — replicas of Jeff Koons' Hoover vacuums in Plexiglas cases; or Marcel Duchamp's *The Bottle Rack*, one of his "readymade" sculptures intended to show that art is all about context, and an everyday thing could have different meaning if put on a pedestal. The show imitated work that's now purchasable exclusively by those with staggeringly deep pockets, and usually talked about only by people with college educations and a certain amount of privilege. Making "poor man's versions" was an attempt to level out the conversation.

"The Oracle," the museum's best show since, attempts to level out a conversation, too. It's easy to imagine such a show working out badly in different circumstances. For instance, when L.A. artist-designer Jorge Pardo made work on and around which to display the Pre-Columbian collection at LACMA, the result was that the installation became Pardo's show and the Pre-Columbian art, made by people no longer around to speak up for themselves, his props. But the way in which art in "The Oracle" is arranged keeps new and old objects on equal footing. Initially, the plan had been to show Cole's collection alongside decidedly modernism-inspired sculptures by artists such as Thomas Houseago, whose work riffs on the kind of figures depicted by Picasso and Matisse as well as indigenous historic art. The formal correlations would have been readily apparent.

But the challenges of running an Underground Museum with limited resources means that sometimes you have to work with what you have, so Kahlil Joseph, Davis' brother, and Henry Taylor, a supporter of the museum, ended up in the show. So did Kandis Williams, who went to school with Davis, and Ruby Neri, whose ceramic sculptures sometimes resemble spirit beings and whose gallery, David Kordansky, cooperated happily. Neri is the only contemporary artist in the show who's not African-American but, while artist's backgrounds — racial, ethnic, class — matter immensely, affecting what art grapples with and who sees it, it's hard to read linear, overall meaning into that fact. It feels more like what just

happened, and this kind of intuitive casualness makes "The Oracle" an open experiment anyone can wander into.

To leave the darkened room where Joseph's video plays and *The Master of Tonj* raises his eyebrows, you slide open a wood door that leads into a gallery where, at least during the day, sunlight mixes with track lighting and a wooden female figure with very short arms and a tall, jagged headdress stands nearest the wall of windows. She's from Tanzania, made in the 1800s, and, like everything else from Cole's collection, standing inside a custom-made white box that protects her but is less pretentious than a pedestal. In front of her stands a funny totem — a bamboo pole growing out of a gold-painted tin — by Henry Taylor, an artist who began working and showing in L.A. in the mid-1990s. Milk cartons have been painted thick black and tied to the bamboo with rope. Since the highest carton looks like a mask, the whole sculpture becomes ritualistic and foreboding.

Four collages by Kandis Williams hang on the surrounding walls. All of them surreal collages incorporating blown-up, photocopied family photos, sometimes with titles that reference literary theory or Christian myths. The next room over features a whole line of figures, three from Cole's collection and one wide-eyed ceramic and spray-painted lady made by Neri. The figure in front of Neri's is from the 17th century, female and legless, made by the Belanda people from the Wau region of South Sudan.

The 19th-century figure behind Neri's lady, the final work you see if you go through the show in order, has intricate geometric layers and notches up and down its leaning body. This is an apotropaic figure, meaning that it functioned to ward off evil. It has an irregularly round face with big eyes and a guileless smile; it's possible that having just looked at Neri's quirky work and still hearing some Kendrick Lamar music in the background brings out more vulnerable personality in this old evil-fighting sculpture than would be apparent otherwise.

There's a quote that pops up in white letters fleetingly in Joseph's video, from angry poet-playwright Amiri Baraka: "We used to know we were stronger than the devil," it says, appearing not long before images of black men levitating upside down, like bats, hanging from lampposts, stronger than something, even if it's not the devil. "The Oracle" makes such connections, between old rituals for side-stepping bad energy and new ones, feel accessible, and accessibility is so often what's missing from conversations about art.

THE ORACLE | The Underground Museum, 3508 W. Washington Blvd., West Adams | Through Sept. 13
(323) 989-9925 | theunderground-museum.com