

Gregory Coates:



Sheer Audacity

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January 13 - March 6, 2020

curated by Jeanne Brasile

Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University
400 South Orange Avenue
South Orange, NJ 07079

cover image:

Equinox 2

feathers, acrylic on luan, 72 inch diameter, 2018

Positively Absolutely Positive

by Jeanne Brasile

When developing this exhibition, I chose the title “Sheer Audacity” which is meant to reflect Gregory’s positive mentality - a willingness to take bold risks, to dare to achieve where others might be dissuaded. Like the titles of Gregory Coates’ artwork, the exhibition’s name is intentionally ambiguous. I cribbed the show’s title from a list of media describing his work *Strut*, which I included in a group show in the spring of 2015. His list of media included rubber, wood and sheer audacity. I remember laughing quietly, yet audibly, as I noted this on his loan agreement, stating to myself, “yes, he is pretty audacious” – thinking not only of the title of the work, but his characterization of his materials which are highly unorthodox and dripping with cultural residue, as well as the subjects he addresses artistically.

The audacity I’m postulating is not one of arrogance, but fearlessness. His transition from figurative painting early in his career was a bold choice. Though he still considers himself a painter, Coates’ current works strongly resemble sculpture or installation art, with an array of textures

and materials organized in three-dimensional space. Notes Coates, it is his need to use color, often thickly applied over his chosen surfaces, that set his work in the realm of painting. Coates uses repurposed materials which he organizes by stacking, laying, accumulating or painting in a highly physical fashion. He came to this enterprising shift when at an artist residency in 1996 in Cape Town, South Africa. At its conclusion, he realized that materials being cast off as rubbish by the departing artists were being collected by a young African artist who was gathering them to make a home - the discarded materials transformed by necessity. It was at this point Coates began to see the use of repurposed materials as a choice of principle - a moral obligation. It was not long after that he realized his adoption of sculptural elements and way of using them brought an attendant emphasis on the physical aspects of his studio practice. The new weight placed on materials and labor evoked his working-class background along with attendant socio-political issues.

In addition to his distinct approach

to materials and process, Coates is a provocateur. His work holds specific meaning to him, but he generously leaves his narratives open-ended for viewers to attribute meaning based on their relationship to the materials, colors, textures and titles that are often double entendres. His serial work *Seeing Red #1 - #3 (Afro Series)*, consists of three large tondos and is an alluring riot of densely packed feathers saturated with thickly applied red paint on panel. The title is idiomatic, indicative of anger, but can also, in current times, be



Fetish Object Series, Juju Inside (Kiki)
hand bag, mixed medium, 20" x 11" x 3", 2019
Courtesy of Monica King Contemporary

read as a political commentary perhaps on red and blue states, and the highly divisive political climate in the present-day United States. Coates cleverly uses the tondo format to concomitantly conjure associations with Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*, a panel painting of the holy family. The tondo format is also widely associated with domestic ideals and the importance of family. Thus, Coates adroitly addresses art historical canons, lived experience and faith, blended with feelings about his own family and heritage.

Similarly, the handbags used in the *Fetish Object Series, Juju Inside* address familial and feminist narratives while leaving entry for viewers. The five handbags featured in this show are each named after a family member – Coates' three sisters, wife and mother-in-law. The bags are sturdy leather vessels in varied shades of brown, encrusted with organic matter; dirt, dried plant materials, pebbles, feathers and mud. Each bag's surface is treated differently and encompasses a variety of shapes from a workmanlike bucket bag to a dainty black, patent leather baguette number that could have belonged to a 1950's socialite with its shiny black exterior and stylized metal clasp. Through the surface application of materials, to the

shapes and textures, each bag is set apart from the others – suggesting the distinctly complex qualities of each of these women. Coates interjects that “everyone has their own baggage” and the work can function metaphorically on this implied level in addition to the literal characteristics of the work.

My Feminine Side, one of two installations in this show, resides on a low wooden platform, set on empty paint cans. A shopping cart rests atop the two-tone black and white plinth. In the cart are a series of highly saturated wooden blue slats painted the deep ultramarine hue favored by Yves Klein. The wood is arranged in a baroque display of sharp angles and radiating trajectories. This piece also addresses Coates' family, emphasizing the influence of the strong women in his life, particularly his mother – a working mom raising eight children in Washington D.C. - and his wife, Kiki, who manages his business affairs and designed and renovated their home and the artists' studio. The installation conflates the domestic (shopping cart) with the notion of ‘masculine’ labor which is introduced with the wood slats, and paint cans. It is an homage to the strength of these two important women in his life – both of whom supported him and enabled

him to actualize as a man and artist. The work, staged on this makeshift platform, can be construed as a monumental work commemorating the everyday champions in the artists' life, and by extension, the ordinary heroes in everyone's lives.



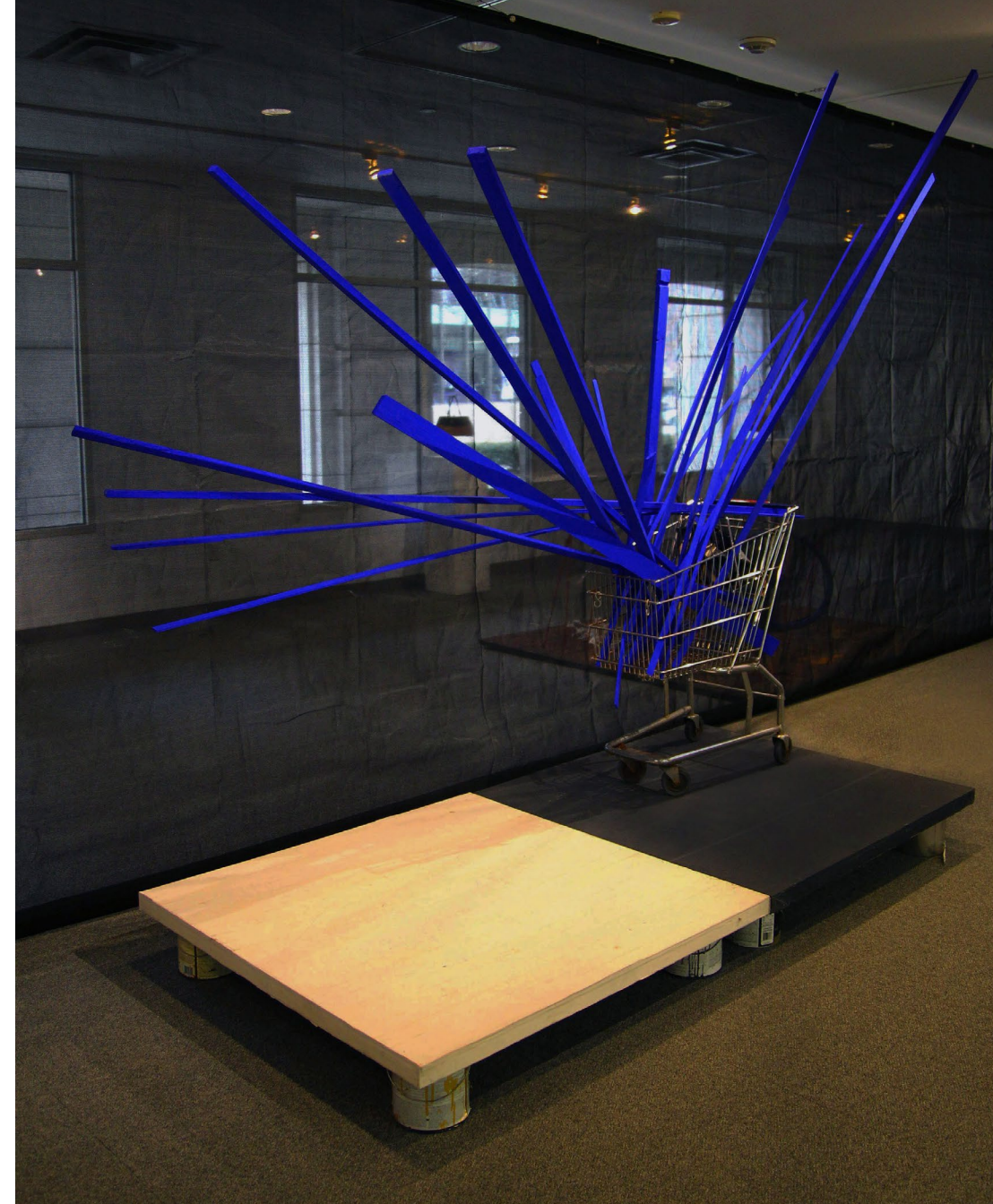
Fetish Object Series, Juju Inside (Hilda)
hand bag, mixed medium, 12" x 14" x 3", 2019

Coates' work is audacious, but as a positive force. He embodies the courage to create work addressing contested subjects such as gender, race, labor, economic and social status, politics and personal

challenges. He evokes nuanced conversation in a time of sound bites and clearly delineated ideological positions. His work uses 'soft objects' made with feathers, paint, wood and organic materials – to address difficult topics, thus making the gallery a safe space for discourse. He adroitly encapsulates complex ideas in simply presented objects that lack pretension. Coates' titles are superimposed over the art's symbolic and literal significance - and his audience's interpretation of the work - to create permutations of meaning. He expertly guides viewers with his mastery of color, materials, language and his particular brand of social abstraction that enables him to critically and respectfully address societal issues. His work can be tongue-in-cheek while simultaneously grounded on solid art theory melded with a perspicacious take on historical and current events.

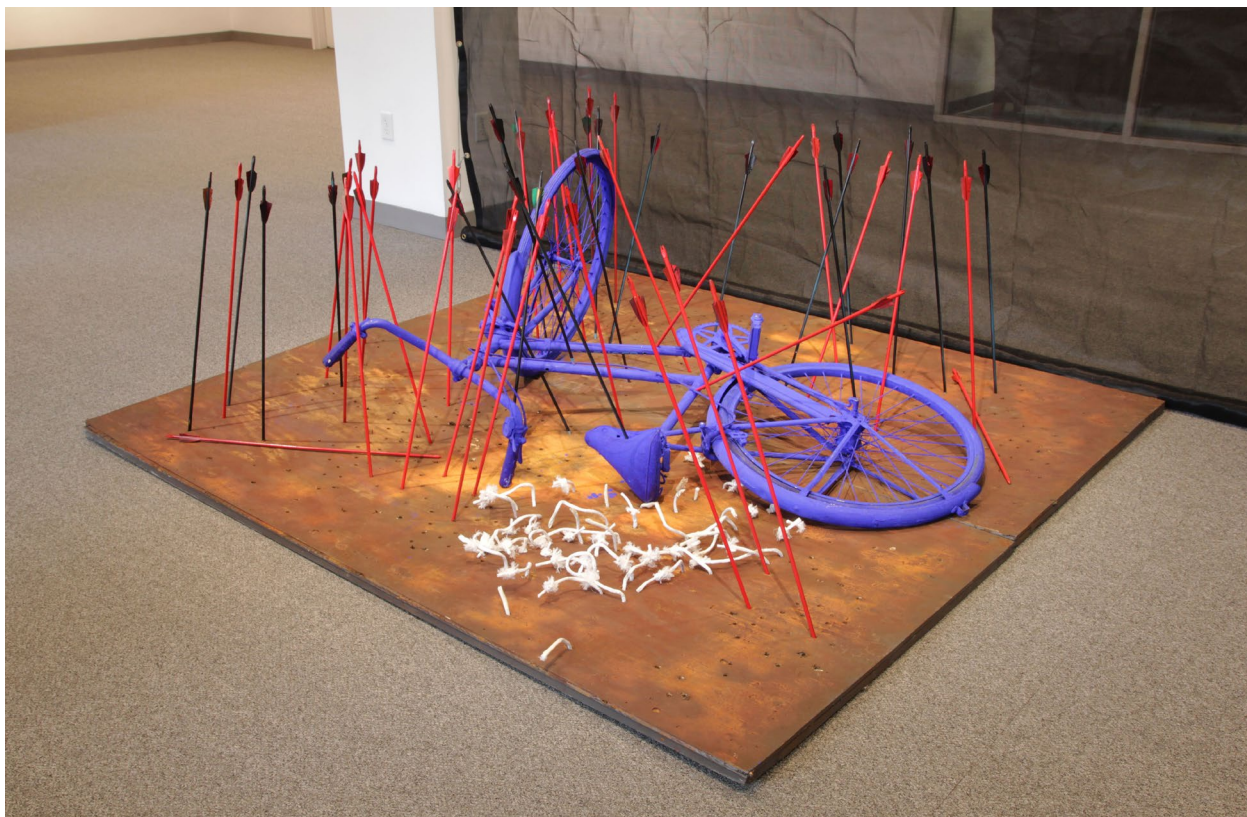
Gregory Coates roots for the underdog – and that includes most of us. He has emboldened himself to break free from the traditions of figurative painting, elevating the act with his innovative use of materials, while uplifting his subjects from the ordinary to the sublime. He celebrates everyday people, championing them via his intelligent use of media which reveals an exceptionally generous spirit. I'm feeling Coates' audacity and it is a warm glow. I hope audiences feel it too and are inspired to channel Coates' bravado to good measure.

My Feminine Side
shopping cart, wood, acrylic paint, 4' x 8' x 10', 2019





Seeing Red (Afro Series)
feathers, acrylic on luan, 48" diameter, 2018



Shooting the Messenger
bicycle, arrows, wood platform, 3'x 4'x 8', 2019
Courtesy of N'Namdi Contemporary Miami



Spring Sounds (Tabasco Series)
feathers, acrylic on luan, 24" diameter, 2018



Fetish Object Series, Juju Inside (Leslie)
hand bag, mixed medium, 16" x 14" x 5", 2019



Fetish Object Series, Juju Inside (Kim)
leather bag, acrylic, mud, 19" x 12" x 4", 2018
Courtesy of Monica King Contemporary



Installation View



Installation View

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