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The Idea of America: Flags, African Americans, and the Far West in *Ouverture*, the inaugural exhibition of the Pinault Collection at Bourse de Commerce

Art exhibit review

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The Idea of America: Flags, African Americans, and the Far West in *Ouverture*, the inaugural exhibition of the Pinault Collection at Bourse de Commerce

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- 1 Four years after it had been announced that Paris's former commodities exchange building would showcase the acquisitions of France's most famous art collector François Pinault (born in 1936), the inaugural exhibit *Ouverture* finally opened its doors to the public in May 2021 (Landais-Barrau 2020). The items in this exhibit are only a taster of what is to come; Pinault will continue to showcase his collection of over ten thousand works over the coming years ("The Collector's Gaze"). Though it is by no means the exclusive territory referenced, the United States occupies a prominent role in *Ouverture*. We realize this almost as soon as we enter the vast space of Bourse de Commerce, which is dominated by a central rotunda. A vast mural (140 metres long, 10 metres high) adorns the edifice's dome ceiling, the handywork of five painters of the Third Republic (Dagen 2021). It is nothing short of a symphony to the international trade scene between the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Northernmost territories of the-then Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. In the "North America" section of the mural, painted by Évariste Vital Luminais between 1886 and 1889, certain central motifs emerge: the stars and stripes of the US flag, white domination, heroic masculinity, and the Far West. These motifs are also taken up and even subverted by a number of US-born artists in Pinault's dazzling début exhibit in this space.

Flags and African American Art

- 2 While the hustle and bustle of traders in negotiation lends a vibrancy to the Bourse de Commerce's central mural, Luminais's section on North America stands out as a scene of tension, violence, and domination. A white man struggles to plant a United States flag, while a number of darker skinned figures stand in subservience to a man in a pith helmet (a visual signifier of colonization) and a white woman seated on a makeshift throne of stone slabs. Through the limpness of the flag, the US appears a fallen nation—its history of slavery and genocide against indigenous peoples marking the mural. The year Luminais began painting his part of the mural, 1886, was the year that Gustave Eiffel offered the Statue of Liberty to the United States as a gesture of transatlantic friendship that sealed the two countries' history of shared revolutionary and egalitarian ideals. Yet, given the mural's location in a former hub of commercial trade, the negative depiction seems likely to owe itself to France's fraught trade relations with the United States at that time. The 1880s were the culmination of decades of tensions between the two nations, which started when the US forfeited (according to the French perspective) its position of neutrality during the French Revolutionary War with Britain at the start of the nineteenth century. By the final decades of the nineteenth century, American protectionism had taken hold, discriminating against all foreign exports, to which France retaliated by imposing maximum duties on US exports under the Meline Tariffs regime (Irwin 98, 258, 306). An extension of these transatlantic tensions, Luminais' work figures the United States as a nation where enslavement and whites dominate.

Figure 1

Section of the North America mural painted by Évariste Vital Luminais, 1886-1889. Bourse de Commerce — Pinault Collection

© Tadao Ando Architect & Associates, Niney et Marca Architectes, Agence Pierre-Antoine Gatier.
Photo Maxime Tétard, Studio Les Graphiquants, Paris

- 3 Awaiting visitors immediately as they exit the Bourse's grand rotunda is the David Hammons Gallery, which brings together over twenty-five works by the African American artist (born in 1943) for the first time in Europe (Filipovic 92). According to *Art Limited*, one of the first works seen, "Oh Say Can You See" (2017) constitutes a counter-response to the "folklorist and colonial vision" (*la vision folkloriste et coloniale*) of Luminais' "North America" mural marouflaged on the rotunda dome ("David Hammons. Exposition").¹ Hammons' African-American flag is in faded hues of brown, green, and red, its edges are in tatters, and it is ridden with bullet holes. The colors are the same as the Pan-African flag, which is over a century old and was an early statement of racial pride and a variation on the stars and stripes of the US banner to accommodate African Americans at a time of Jim Crow segregation. Hammons' frayed flag suggests that this space of accommodation is impossible, and that for African Americans, the US has never been the so-called "land of the free", a line from the national anthem that the artist's chosen title for the work, quoting the first line of the song, also references.
- 4 I would argue that rather than a counter-response, there is more continuity between the Luminais "North America" mural and Hammons' work than meets the eye, albeit borne out of different motivations and historical contexts. Luminais' flaccid flag hardly trumpets the glory of the "Star-Spangled Banner". Indeed, it seems likely to constitute a disguised jibe by the French against the US as a bad trading partner at the end of the nineteenth century. Hammons' "Oh Say Can You See" is an intensified version of this Americanophobia, commissioning irony (a tool used by Hammons throughout his work) to attack the very idea of the United States. If tatters and tears are a salient feature of "Oh Say Can You See", rags are not far away in Luminais' mural either. As a counterpoint to the rich yellow cloths being traded above the scene of the flag, sullied rugs are strewn on the ground, their limpness imitating the adjacent stars and stripes.
- 5 A transhistorical echo chamber is set up between Luminais' tepid rendition of the American banner and Hammons' "Oh Say Can You See". This is sustained as we proceed through the Hammons gallery. Torn bin liners, black and transparent, define three works labeled "Untitled" from 2007, 2008, and 2010, an example of Hammons' creation of artworks from scrap, discarded, and unappreciated materials—a sort of "home-grown organicism" (Filipovic 90) that has earned him connection with the Italian *Arte Povera* movement ("David Hammons. Exposition"). The *Untitled* series forms a metonymical chain with both the frayed fadedness of "Oh Say Can You See", and the rags in Luminais' mural. Ritornello and repetition are characteristic of Hammons' oeuvre, as the introductory caption to the Hammons gallery informs us. Their use here turns Luminais' historical painting (depicting the fraught trading relations between France and the US) into a contemporary critique of the American nation's racism. This reappropriation is in line with efforts to decolonize the space of the museum more broadly shaping the creative industries as we emerge from the pandemic.²

Figure 2

Torn bin liners, ritornello and return. Vue d'exposition "Ouverture", Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection, Paris 2021

Courtesy of the artist and of the Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection. Photo Aurélien Mole

- 6 A similar back and forth between art and its surroundings, between the present tense of the work and the history of the Bourse de Commerce, transpires from the site-specific meaning accruing to Hammons' "Minimum Security", a video and installation dating between 2007 and 2020, shown for the first time ever to gallery-goers here at the Bourse de Commerce (Bethenod 23). As we enter the Hammons gallery, "Minimum Security" greets us on a television screen, appearing as still as an image on a canvas if we catch the video during its long moment of stasis and inaction. Onscreen, a hollow cell in hues of cold grey and rusted metals contain two wooden platforms resembling bunk beds, a mockup of a prison unit as the title indicates. A Black man dressed in a heavy dark overcoat and top-cum-bowler hat (returned to in "One Stone Head" [1997] later in the Hammons gallery) enters the scene with what appears a miniature version of a growler, a bottle popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the purposes of making home-brewed beer. The man drinks from the bottle and sprays the fluid high into the wall-less cell, a particularly defiant gesture in this COVID-19-inflected times. We watch this action from behind our face masks reminded by the suffocating fabric that our own bodily splutter is most unwelcome. The man of "Minimum Security" then opens the fake prison cell with a key before slamming it shut and exiting the scene slowly, as the cage rattles precariously. The emphasis is not on protecting the public from prisoners in so-called maximum-security cells, but on the rickety and eponymous *minimum* security that the United States has provided its African American communities.
- 7 "Minimum Security" demands our patience; if we don't wait for several minutes, we are likely to miss the video's fleeting moment of action. Yet the opportunity is forsaken by a number of visitors uncomfortable with being detained (ironically enough given the oeuvre's carceral theme) in the narrow antechamber that forms the entrance to the

Hammons gallery where the video is situated. Nonetheless Hammons—who has expressed his disdain for the elitist, “overly educated”, and majority white, gallery-going public (Filipovic 92)—forces our return to this work since the structure of “Minimum Security” is physically present at the rear end of the gallery. In an equally compact vestibule, the cell is juxtaposed against a back wall whose painting depicts the trade routes of the nineteenth century, a reminder of the Bourse de Commerce’s history. This vestibule is bathed in a penumbral light, constituting one of Hammons’ assaults on the clinically lit “white cube” format of many galleries (Filipovic 92).³ In this darkened space lies an ignominious history: Hammons’ metal “Minimum Security” is in the middle of the two trading route maps of the back wall, labeled “America” and “Africa”, a symbolic Middle Passage of modern times. On the right “Africa” map, the lower portion remains unrestored, echoing the hollowness of “Minimum Security” and alluding to a history effaced and robbed from enslaved people transported to the Americas as a result of the rise of mercantilism—the condition of the Bourse de Commerce’s very existence. The juxtaposition between Hammons’ artwork and the Parisian building, again, seems to set out to decolonize the Bourse de Commerce.

- 8 In gallery 7, situated on the second floor, the paintings of Alabama-born Kerry James Marshall (born in 1955) evoke a similar space of struggle for representation for African Americans in art history. Influenced by Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) (Zabunyan 269), Marshall accords Black Americans a dignified visibility. His work may be characterized as a figurative style of portraiture. The artist depicts African Americans in quotidian settings such as cafes, laundromats, and beaches (“Untitled [Two Eggs Over Medium, Sausage, Hash Browns, Whole Wheat Toast]”, 2017; “Laundry Man”, 2019; “Untitled”, 2008-2014), in performance (“These Blues”, 1983; “The Wonderful One, 1986), as well as in abstract spaces replete with symbols. These symbols index both African American culture and art history (for example, “Untitled [Self-Portrait] Supermodel, 1994; “Lost Boys: AKA Lil Bit, 1993”).⁴
- 9 Continuing the theme of flag-themed reappropriation seen in the Hammons gallery, Marshall’s “Untitled”, 2012 features a reclining Black male nude clutching another Pan-African flag.⁵ Draped over the figure’s upper thighs to hide his genitalia, this flag seems a humorous recoding of the famous Odalisque paintings of the nineteenth century (for instance, Ingres’ “La Grande Odalisque”, 1814), the most famous of which in a Parisian context is Manet’s “Olympia” (1863). Manet’s painting is often cited as a work that heralded the onset of modernity in art. It has been praised for the titular subject’s defiant gaze which meets the viewer as well as for the unsentimental modernity of Olympia’s stark white skin—distanced from the Renaissance idealism of paintings like “Venus of Urbino” (Titian, 1534).⁶ Reminding us of Manet’s painting, the window adjacent to Marshall’s “Untitled”, 2012, reveals the Parisian cityscape in which “Olympia” is also held, at the nearby Musée d’Orsay. If Marshall’s work may be deemed to recall Manet, Marshall nonetheless promotes the Black figure of “Olympia” (1863)—a slave or servant who historically has been disregarded by art critics—to center stage. In Marshall’s painting, the Pan-African flag secures Black self-affirmation, while the nude man’s socks humorously supplant Olympia’s improbable high-heeled slippers. In the wider setting of the “Ouverture” exhibit, the richly hued brown and blonde fur bedspread on which Marshall’s figure reclines complete with his fully opened-out banderole recalls and recasts the tattered rugs and un-hoisted banners of Luminais’

mural. Marshall's work, like Hammons' acerbic "Oh Say Can You See", reappropriates the codes and aesthetics of art history.

Figure 3

Édouard Manet, "Olympia", 1863, Musée d'Orsay.

Photograph by Gautier Poupeau.

Heroic Masculinity and the Far West

Figure 4

On the far right of Luminais' mural, Remington-esque cowboys can be seen. Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection

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- 10 Luminais' North America section of the mural does not just contain a critique of the US; in the far-right corner of the work, two men on horseback, their faces turned away from us to give a fuller view of their Stetsons, rein in cattle and a bull. The curves of their bodies echoes the musculature of their steeds; the motion and rapidity of these cattle hands are worthy of Frederic Remington whose idealized paintings of life on the Western frontier have commonly been deemed the art historical origins of the cinematic genre of the Hollywood Western. As numerous scholars have shown, the French have a longstanding fascination with the American Far West.⁷ As one of the exhibition sites for the 1889 Exposition Universelle, the Bourse de Commerce coincided with the history of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which captivated locals. Art historian Emily Burns has argued that the French were reminded in Buffalo Bill's acts of France's own colonial days in North America (of French fur trappers and their associated emporia) (Burns 14). In his Remington-esque painting of cowboys, the right corner of Luminais' "North America" mural likely set out to stoke the fires of the French public's fascination for the Far West.
- 11 The larger-than-life photographic triptych "Untitled (Cowboy)" (2015, 2016, 2016) by American artist Richard Prince, found in gallery three on the first level of "Ouverture", calls attention to the fantasy behind this fascination for the Far West. Rips plastered over with sellotape figure prominently in Prince's three images of Stetson-wearing cowboys who variously roam through the great American wilderness on horseback, rein in renegade steeds, and sit around a campfire at dusk. The images are all taken from the Marlboro Man publicity campaign (1954-1999), reappropriated and reframed as part of the project of the "Picture Generation" to which Prince and all the artists in this third gallery are assigned in the opening caption. A term coined by Douglas Crimp in 1977, the Picture Generation impugned the status of the photograph as an unmarked

reflection of reality.⁸ Part of a much larger collection begun in 1980 and ongoing by the artist, Prince's Marlboro Man triptych equally underscores the medium behind the myth, prompting an estrangement effect in spectators. We espy a white surface beneath the images, recalling not simply the torn pages of a magazine where the Marlboro Man adverts might be found but also resembling the stains often seen in celluloid cinema, aged through dust and scratches—consequently bringing forth the American cowboy in the cinematic genre of the Western too.

- 12 Like the dynamic interplay between Hammons' African American flag and the Luminais mural, a second echo chamber is established between the Prince triptych, found at the rear end of gallery three, and fellow American Sherrie Levine's series *After Russell Lee* (2016), situated on the left wall nearby. Levine, known for her reproduction of Depression-era documentary imagery⁹, has assembled sixty photographs originally taken by Russell Lee. Part of the same generation as Dorothea Lange (whose 1936 image of "A Destitute Mother" has become iconic), Lee took pictures for the Farm Security Administration, an initiative of the New Deal era program of economic recovery (Ebner 165). Lee set out to document the lives of the residents of Pie Town, New Mexico. Taken at a later time than the conquest of the American Far West, these images, in color in both Lee's series and in Sherrie Levine's *After Russell Lee*, nonetheless share features seen in the Luminais mural and in the Prince triptych: the epic mountainous landscape "Dugout House of Faro Caudill" resembles the far-right photograph of the Prince trilogy in which two men on steeds traverse a wide-framed, rolling topography; the Stetson-wearing men sitting huddled in a circle as they eat in *Men of the Community of Pie Town* echo a similar scene around a campfire in Prince's central photograph; the men lassoing cattle in "Driving Calves into the coral for roping" are redolent of Luminais' Remington-like cattle hands on the rotunda mural.

Figure 5

"Dugout House of Faro Caudill, homesteader with Mt. Allegro in the background, Pie Town, New Mexico".

Photography by Lee Russell (1903-1986). October 1940. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877738/> [accessed 9 August 2021].

Figure 6

Men of the community of Pie Town, New Mexico eating at the barbeque.

Photograph by Lee Russell. October 1940. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877734/> [accessed 9 August 2021].

Figure 7

Driving calves into the corral for roping at the rodeo of the Pie Town, New Mexico Fair.

Photograph by Lee Russell. October 1940. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/fsac.1a34156/> [accessed 9 August 2021].

- 13 While these images might lead us to think that the myth of the frontier was continued in the era of the Great Depression, they are overwhelmed, and thus displaced, by the

majority of photographs in Levine's series, which depict a rather unromantic reality: men, women, and horses toil and till the landscape; children are fed by their fathers; the community is brought together for social gatherings—quite unlike the all-male bonding occurring in Richard Prince's campfire image on the adjacent wall. The middle shots of married couples in "Jim Norris and wife, homesteaders" and "Faro and Doris Caudill"¹⁰ recall Grant Wood's 1930 painting "American Gothic" (used profusely by Paris's Orangerie museum back in 2016-2017 to advertise "The Age of Anxiety: La Peinture américaine des années 1930"), conjuring up a more staid genre of American regionalism, with its pastoral landscapes, verdant hills, and hard-working men and women.

Figure 8

"Faro and Doris Caudill, homesteaders, Pie Town, New Mexico".

Photograph by Lee Russell. October 1940. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877684/> [accessed 9 August 2021].

14 Figure 9

"Jim Norris and wife, homesteaders, Pie Town, New Mexico".

Photograph by Lee Russell. October 1940. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877697/> [accessed 9 August 2021].

Figure 10

Grant Wood. "American Gothic". Friends of American Art Collection. 1930. Oil on Beaver Board. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american-gothic> [accessed 9 August 2021].

- 15 The overwhelming themes of this third gallery, dedicated exclusively to Pinault's photography collections and dominated by American artists, are gender and sexuality.

Moving away altogether from the Far West are eleven images from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series (1978-1979), Martha Wilson's *A Portfolio of Models* (1974), and Louise Lawler's *Helms Amendment* (1989). The first two artists evoke the idea central to queer theory that gender is a series of performances, also echoed in the work of the one French artist to feature in this gallery, Michel Journiac. Meanwhile, Lawler's installation, comprised of ninety-four identical black and white photographs of a striated cup, goes from queer theory to queer activism: the work denounces the homophobia of US Senators in 1987 as they voted in the eponymous Helms Amendment, which blocked federal funding from being invested in prevention programs that would stem the tide of the raging AIDS epidemic (Boulvain 156). Through the assemblage of all the work in this gallery, the glorification of the Far West seen in the Luminais mural of the central rotunda is subverted, firstly by Richard Prince's and Sherrie Levine's series; and secondly by the wider placement of Prince's and Levine's works in this particular gallery, which, through the common medium of photography, sets out to explore the idea of a queer America.¹¹

- 16 In the catalogue to *Ouverture*, Pinault declares his intention to harness art as a "rebuttal of injustice, the acceptance of diversity" (Pinault 11). The US art of this inaugural exhibition, focusing on African American self-affirmation and debunking the myths of the American frontier hero (white and heterosexual), is a key motor in this. But it is important not to overstate the impact of this, as some have risked by praising the billionaire art collector for his African American artworks and for the critical distance the collection creates vis-à-vis the history of slavery and white domination imprinted on the walls of the Bourse de Commerce.¹² While the Pinault collection displays a timeliness in its efforts to call into question the colonial legacies of the art history on the walls of the Bourse de Commerce, David Hammons' reflection on the elitist demographic of gallery visitors remain as applicable to this space as any other mainstream gallery in Europe. Pinault has stated his hopes to welcome a "truly diverse audience [...] to, above all, those furthest removed from it" (Pinault 11). Though positioned in the heart of Paris's Les Halles, which is a meeting place for working-class and racialized populations travelling in from the suburbs, the visitors—myself included—to the adjacent Bourse de Commerce remain overwhelmingly white. Time will tell if the diversity we see represented in the US art of Pinault's collection will step out from behind the canvas to change the composition of the audiences flocking to this new art museum.

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NOTES

1. Marouflage refers to the application of adhesive in order to glue a canvas to a base. It is a technique often used in murals. An image of "Oh Say Can You See" can be found here: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/09/david-hammons-follows-his-own-rules> [accessed 15 September 2021].
2. See, for example, Adam Hochschild, "The Fight to Decolonize The Museum." *The Atlantic*. January/February 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/when-museums-have-ugly-pasts/603133/> [accessed 9 August 2021].
3. The white cube format alludes to the curatorial aesthetic in which artworks are displayed in rooms painted in white, deemed a neutral background. Hammons' work enables us to see that, far from neutral, white is the color of racial domination. See, "Art Term – White Cube". *Tate*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/w/white-cube> [accessed 9 August 2021].
4. For an informative guided tour of symbols and signs in the work of Kerry James Marshall, see the Met Museum's "Inside the Studio: Decoding the symbolism of Kerry James Marshall's 2014 painting, *Untitled* (Studio)". <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2021/2/kerry-james-marshall-untitled-studio> [accessed 9 August 2021].

5. An image of the artwork can be found here: <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/sites/default/files/styles/big/public/expo/img/marshall-untitled-2012.jpg?itok=zd45cs5E> [accessed 15 September 2021].
6. For instance, see <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/olympia/ywFEI4rxgCSO1Q?hl=en> [accessed 9 August 2021].
7. Gregory Mohr. "The French Camargue-Western." In *Crossing Frontiers: Intercultural Perspectives on the Western*. Eds. Peter Schulz et al. (Marburg: Schüren, 2012). 87-95. See also, the *Transatlantica* dossier on the American West in France. Emily C. Burns, and Agathe Cabau. "Call and Answer: Dialoguing the American West in France," *Transatlantica* 2 (2017). URL: journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/10676 ; DOI: doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.10676. Accessed 2 September 2020. DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.10676
8. "Journiac/Wilson/Levine/Sherman/Prince/Lawler". *Collection Pinault*. <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/en/boursedecommerce/journiac-wilson-levine-sherman-prince-lawler> [accessed 9 August 2021]/
9. Most famously showcased in the exhibit *Sherrie Levine After Walker Evans* in 1981 at the Metro Pictures gallery, New York (Ebner 165).
10. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877684/>, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877697/>
11. The idea of a queer(ed) America is evoked in all but the work of Michel Journiac who was a French photographer. But even Journiac is positioned as a precursor to American queer theory in the exhibition catalogue (Moulène and Bethenod 147). By "queer", I refer both to the umbrella term for LGBTQIA activism for the rights of gender and sexual minorities, and to the central idea proposed by Judith Butler that gender and sexual orientation are secured through a series of (often unconscious, sometimes parodic) performances. See, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
12. For instance: Judith Benhamou. « L'art afro-américain en force à la Bourse de Commerce. » *Les Échos*. 19 May 2021. <https://www.lesechos.fr/weekend/livres-expositions/lart-afro-america-en-force-a-la-bourse-de-commerce-1316416> [accessed 9 August 2021]; Roger Cohen, "A self-styled 'troublemaker' creates a different Paris Museum." *Art Daily*. <https://artdaily.com/news/136043/A-self-styled--troublemaker--creates-a-different-Paris-museum#.YREO0y2B0fM> [accessed 9 August 2021].

ABSTRACTS

Critical review of the US art holdings in "Ouverture", the inaugural exhibit of the Pinault Collection at the Bourse de Commerce, Paris.

Compte-rendu de l'art états-unien dans « Ouverture », l'exposition inaugurale de la Collection Pinault à la Bourse de Commerce, Paris.

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Keywords: African American art, Far West, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, murals, decolonization

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