ARTFORUM
JANUARY 2008
INTERNATIONAL

WINTER PREVIEW
50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

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Michele O'Marah and Henry Taylor

SISTER AT RENTAL

In their recent exhibition, "Repeat after me: I AM a Revolutionary," Michele O'Marah and Henry Taylor considered the civil rights struggle from distinct yet complementary perspectives. The show was a chance to reflect on a political era more charged than our own with the hope of achieving social justice, and with the expectation that individual struggle might lead to meaningful participation in the fate of community and nation. Though in terms of cultural integration certain of the advances envisioned by the civil rights movement have come to pass, "Repeat after me..." spoke to the racism that persists today, and to the economic and class issues that underlie it.

Michele O'Marah, *Character Portraits, William F. Buckley and Huey P. Newton*, 2007, two color photographs, each 25 x 21".

Huey Newton (all works 2007), Taylor's large portrait of the Black Panther Party leader, is modeled on the iconic photo of the man flanked by African tribal shields and seated in an elegant wicker chair, a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other. Reminding us of the continued relevance of a previous generation's commitment, the artist has collaged headlines about the recent death of Sean Bell, the unarmed black man killed by New York police on the evening of his bachelor party, on either side of Newton's sober stare.

Taylor's portrait of Eldridge Cleaver contrasts with that of Newton, alluding to the differences between the two Black Panther Party leaders themselves. Apportioned into geometric forms, this more brooding and elemental image presents Cleaver seated in iconic profile in the manner of "Whistler's Mother" (aka James McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, 1871). He is presented as the cerebral cool to Newton's confrontational heat. It's as if—unlike Newton—he needn't confront the viewer directly, or as though the individual, internal revolution were the ideal focus of contemplation.

The exhibition isn't a particularly nostalgic or romanticized take on the civil rights era, many of whose leaders were either killed or, like Cleaver and Newton, faced a range of personal trials. *How goes it with the Black Movement* is O'Marah's verbatim video re-creation of a 1973 *Firing Line* interview between Newton and arch-conservative host William F. Buckley. The interplay between Buckley's self-righteous disgust and Newton's now droll, now tedious disquisitions is inflected by the tension between the two men, as well as by the seriousness of the issues they discuss.

Though one would sometimes be hard put to side with either of these figures, one suspects a bond between the men based on an unfulfilled desire to understand one another. If Newton at times seems dangerously smug in his defense of Maoism, absurdly ironic is Buckley's assertion that according to "the rules of democracy . . . the art of persuasion has to be practiced short of assassination," which conveniently overlooks the 1969 police murders of BPP officials Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, not to mention widely alleged state involvement in the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

This irony is attested to by Taylor's *Shoot to Kill*, a cardboard sculpture depicting Dr. King behind a set of shooting targets. It's one of a number of three-dimensional works by both artists, with Taylor's tending to be cobbled together out of what some angry kid might find around the house, and O'Marah's being more polished or traditionally "feminine," such as the handmade *Trinity Banner* or *Revolutionary Button Set*, a suite of political buttons featuring Taylor as Newton and art world impresario Maynard Monrow as Buckley. These elements add some levity to a show on guard against being overly strident. By combining coolness and heat (as well as humor and fury), O'Marah and Taylor recall the dedication of an era not so long ago, in the midst of what otherwise feels like despair.

—*Tom Breidenbach*

Artforum, review
January 2008