

ART PAPERS

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MAY/JUNE 2008 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €8

RALPH LEMON NEW ORLEANS

Ralph Lemon's multimedia installation (*the efflorescence of* Walter) is many things (Contemporary Arts Center; January 18—March 30, 2008). To call it "multicultural" would be an understatement, as its thematic scope and use of many media suggest a time- and space-bending smorgasbord. A choreographer turned conceptual artist, Lemon deploys a multitude of videos, line drawings, and folk art and found object sculptures, held together by the paradoxical persona of Walter Carter, a hundred-year-old Yazoo City, Mississippi, former sharecropper whose video presence traces a living link between past, present and perhaps the future. Organized by CAC associate curator Claire Tancons, the installation manages to set a tone quite unlike what we usually associate with most conceptual multimedia endeavors.

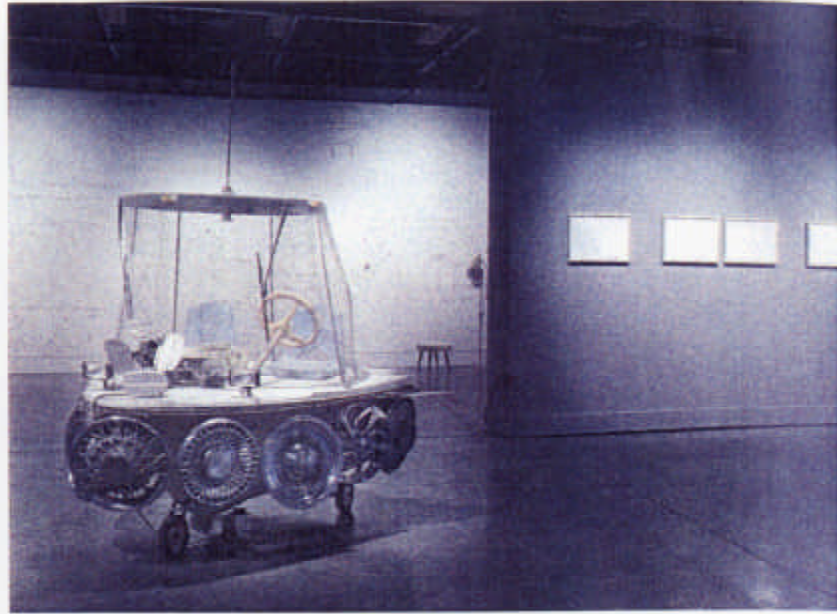
Lemon, himself a youthful fiftysomething with an intellectual curiosity that knows no boundaries, discovered Carter while doing research for a performance involving Civil Rights-era sites, including Yazoo City. Inspired by cultural icons such as James Baldwin, Bruce Nauman, and Joseph Beuys, as well as African shamanism and Asian Buddhism, Lemon's *Geography Trilogy*, 2004, explored notions of race, history, and memory across three continents, a quest that eventually took him to Mississippi and set the stage for (*the efflorescence of*) Walter. Here, Walter Carter emerges as a foil for Lemon's ideas as well as a spry skeptic who dismisses events like NASA moon missions as fantasies even as he plays along with Lemon's generally esoteric undertakings. An oddly dadaistic duo, their symbolic antics come across like a playful form of crazy wisdom undertaken in response to the official madness we call history.

The result is an installation that's elusive yet intriguing, perhaps because we can almost sense their organic process of rumination or cogitation. A video animation of James Baldwin is projected above the sprawling exhibi-

tion, his painfully eloquent features recreated in Lemon's terse line drawings as his oracular utterances issue from the audio. If Baldwin is a recurring reference, so is Brer Rabbit. In a series of small drawings arranged in cartoon-like sequences, a rabbit interacts with a man in a pointy Joseph Beuys-like hat along with another man in a bunny suit who plays records—perhaps the R & B hits depicted in some paintings on the wall. Is the man making the bunny perform tricks or is the bunny calling the shots?

It's a tricky question. In a video, a man in a bunny suit shoots at another similarly dressed man who limps off across a field in a scene fraught with psychological intrigue. In Joel Chandler Harris' African American folk tales, Brer Rabbit appears as an escape artist who routinely foils the predatory wiles of Brer Fox, and in this show his spirit is alive and well. While Lemon is clearly urbane and well educated, his oblique methods often recall the intuitive approaches of untutored visionary artists. This is seen in a number of Carter's video performances that have a whiff of Brer Rabbit crazy wisdom about them. In one, he smashes a large ceramic rabbit figurine; in another, he dons a space suit, preparing for the ultimate escape. Lemon may be pushing it here, but he did have Carter and some of his cronies cobble their version of a spacecraft from junkyard parts and a fine collection of hubcaps. Just beyond it, a visitor lounge showcases more drawings, incendiary writing on the walls, and assorted science fiction novels by African American authors. Like Brer Rabbit, Lemon is a master of symbolism who gives us a lot to think about without ever allowing pedantry to overwhelm his slyly playful sensibilities.

—D. Eric Bookhardt



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Ralph Lemon, video still of Walter Carter donning space suit; installation view of Ralph Lemon: (*the efflorescence of*) Walter; background: Spaceship drawing mural, 2008; foreground, left to right: *The Spaceship*, 2006, and *Young Baldwin Drawings* series, 2004 (courtesy of the artist and the Contemporary Arts Center; photo: Michael Smith)