

CAVIAR & BANANAS

Ishmael Reed and the Big, Beautiful Art Market

In advance of the full performance we look forward to seeing this year, I make bold to review the video reading¹ of Ishmael Reed's new play, *The Slave Who Loved Caviar*. The production, beautifully narrated by Tennessee Reed, was produced remotely due to the pandemic. This in itself demonstrates a technical mastery and the prodigious talents of the actors, especially Rome Neal of Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The video whets our appetite for the live performance to come.

Pinning down, debating, categorizing or fully comprehending the complex narratives of this seasoned, fearless writer can challenge even Reed's most faithful long-term readers. His resources are endless. For example, offering a pedestrian critique of Reed's "Loop-Garoo" Kid, a cowboy character who utilizes futuristic space travel,² which might include "correcting" the name to a proper 'Loup-Garou', or seeing the cowboy/spaceman meld as an absurdist conflation of heroic structure, is surely to restrict one's gaze to the tiny pinhole of genre, revealing the critic as a pinhead. Reed's fertile imagination is certainly at work in *The Slave Who Loved Caviar*, where Ishmael Reed himself appears as a vampire, who ensnares his would-be artstar victims with the aid of an evil assistant, and thus comes to the attention of a fearless detective.

I was inducted into the critic's role by the caustic Dave Hickey, who challenged me to bring my own voice as a contemporary artist into the art conversation. He also warned me that only an articulate and well-informed writer could hope to succeed in the field. Rather than telling the reader what to think about Reed's marvelous new play, I will discuss my own lens into some cogent and very current questions he raises.

Teaching lower-division art history to college students throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, I faced a critical obstacle: the textbooks. The artists pictured therein did not match the faces in my classes. Work selected as culturally "good" or "representational" often simply wasn't. By deft maneuvering and appropriation of instructor's privileges, I brought our analysis to bear on the context of the texts; we looked at how the work got its visibility and, most importantly, its lasting value.

In his liminal essay “The Birth of the Big, Beautiful Art Market,” Dave Hickey writes about the way art dealers based their sales campaign on the hugely successful commodification of the American car. To sell the consumer a new car every year, you first have to make him want it. In order to create and drive this desire, Cadillac hired designers including Frank Hershey, a former WWI naval officer. Basing his design on the “Fork-Tailed Devil” P38 Fighter ³ so feared by the Nazis, Hershey created the striking tailfins that put the company first in car sales in America until 1955.

To sell art at “white-hot” prices, you must first convince your wealthy buyers of its value, and that must be based upon novelty and scarcity. In his book *The Tradition of the New*⁴, Harold Rosenberg pinpoints this driving factor to coincide with the early 20th century art market that began in New York City. Get the newest one, get the only one, make all your friends jealous, and show that you have the best eye for what’s happening in art! has become so prevalent among the fashionable super-rich that Maurizio Cattelan’s banana, simply stuck to the wall with six inches of grey duct tape, sold for 120,000 dollars at the 2019 Miami Basel. Someone ate the banana; critics and fellow artists drubbed Cattelan mercilessly; Arthur Goldstein, chief editor of Artnet, wrote an article titled “The Vultures Are Circling,” stating that young artists might “get in,” but they might not “get out alive.”

Ishmael Reed refers to that same taped banana piece in *The Slave Who Loved Caviar*. A careless reader might take his meaning to be a wholesale indictment of contemporary art, but it’s the vultures we need to see. Equally, with the title of the play Reed invokes very heated historic arguments among African Americans about effective resistance to slavery.

According to Malcom X, speaking at Michigan State University, East Lansing, on January 23, 1963,⁵ the slaves working and living in the owner’s house became invested in their privilege. They then identified with their white owners and the food, clothing and comfort they experienced, he said. In fact, they would be unable to survive on their own without it. He maintained that given an obviously hypothetical choice, they would actually fight against other slaves in defense of their owners. Malcolm was not making a simple point. He was indicting an entire system. But what about the people caught inside it? Weren’t they the ones with the agency for resistance?

Ishmael Reed invokes this familiar cultural discussion with characteristic scholarship and intellectual agility. To simply assume the artist/slave loves his caviar, his master and his system is to fall into a most ingeniously constructed trap. Resistance has two forms – from inside the system of oppression, or from the outside. The first is characterized by the loss of agency and authority that is imposed upon the individual. In the second case, the individual makes choices and maintains the dignity of selfhood, but loses the “caviar” or rewards of obedience.

Reed himself is an example of the second choice and its consequences. When he could not get a publisher in the US for *Going Too Far: Essays About America's Nervous Breakdown*, 2012, it was published in Canada. Reed has founded and cofounded several small presses, journals, and organizations, including the Before Columbus Foundation, Ishmael Reed Publishing Company, PEN Oakland, *Quilt* magazine, and Yardbird Publishing Company, shouldering the responsibilities of funding, publicity and more.

The celebration of prodigious African American talent in the self-styled “art world” is a slow process indeed. The incomparable photographer Dawoud Bey, whose *Portraits* span twenty years (1975-1995), did not have that work shown until 1995. “*The Birmingham Project*”⁷ about the young African Americans killed on September 15, 1965 was not shown until 50 years later, at the Birmingham Museum. Bey’s powerful work will finally be presented this year at San Francisco MOMA for the first time. And there is the choice made by celebrated African American artist Kehinde Wiley, whose accomplishments include painting Barack Obama’s presidential portrait. Wiley is a highly recognized and well-paid figure in contemporary art, who chose to give back by creating the Black Rock artists residency to support other artists. He located the new residency in Dakar, Senegal, thus avoiding the constraints of corporate funding and the resulting control of artist selection⁶.

Art historians and literalists who balk at Ishmael Reed’s characterizations of Andy Warhol will be lost in a Platonic cave of their own making. Warhol has been well-documented in books and film, and probably would enjoy being a controversial subject of Ishmael Reed’s. It is by framing the art world through the neo-slave narrative that Reed tears off the veils of whiteness in which its sacred canons are shrouded. Thus he provides an opportunity for change from within the system, which arts professionals urgently need to recognize.

As a professor teaching art history, I used my own agency and authority to provide curriculum that examined and confronted established concepts and assumptions. For instance, when I invited visiting artists into the classroom, I did not invite anyone white. Similarly, I had a 3-page handout of important artists, available for students upon request when they wrote research papers, that didn't list any white artists. It is noteworthy that nobody ever commented about this. It gave the students real choice, making them the authority and agents of their own education about art.

I conclude with a final word for my art colleagues, or any others who may remain concerned with Reed's portrayal of Andy Warhol and distracted from the matter at hand in the play. Dr. Patrick McGee, Professor of Race & Cultural Studies at LSU, Baton Rouge, gives the best explanation about both my teaching practices and the importance of *The Slave Who Loved Caviar* as acts of activism and education. In his critique of racial ideology, "*Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*", Dr. McGee says that because of "the historical contradictions that compose American society, ...art [is] a symptom of history that can be made to reveal its historical truth only through a critical intervention that lays bare the context of the text." Ishmael Reed has given us a masterful view of the truth. We will do well to heed it.

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¹ Reed, Ishmael. *The Slave Who Loved Caviar*, video reading.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgiFuEUhzy0>

² Reed, Ishmael. *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*. 1969 Chatham Bookseller

³ Severson, Aaron. "[Fork-Tailed Devil: The P-38 Lightning and the Birth of Cadillac's Famous Fins.](#)"

⁴ Rosenberg, Harold. *The Tradition of the New*. Horizon Press: New York. 1959

⁵ <https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/mxp/speeches/mxa17.html>

⁶ Black Rock Senegal. Kehinde Wiley. <https://africanshapers.com/16-artistes-selections-pour-la-premiere-residence-au-black-rock-senegal/>

⁷ Dawoud Bey: *The Birmingham Project*. <https://www.artsbma.org/exhibition/dawoud-bey-the-birmingham-project/>

⁸ McGee, Patrick, Phd. *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*. Palgrave MacMillan, 1997