

ARTS

At the Wattis, the Aftermath of an Invasion and a Kaleidoscope of Black Experience

By [Sarah Hotchkiss](#) Jun 4, 2019



Akosua Adoma Owusu, Installation view of 'Welcome to the Jungle,' 2019 at CCA Wattis Institute; "Split Ends, I Feel Wonderful" (detail), 2012. (Courtesy of the artist; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

Like Heraclitus’ river, you can’t step into the same Wattis Institute twice. Perhaps that’s because its no-frills, white box architecture doesn’t overpower the art. Or maybe it’s because the space has a propensity for nimble, daring exhibition design (led by Calen Barca-Hall), unobtrusively putting each show in its best light. The Wattis is chameleon-like, just like its GIF-filled, [constantly-in-motion website](#) (which I think I finally appreciate, years after its debut).

During the [last set of exhibitions](#), newspaper covering the space’s street-facing windows gave the main gallery a secretive, under construction feel. And now, with Abbas Akhavan’s [cast for a folly](#) and Akosua Adoma Owusu’s [Welcome to the Jungle](#), the Wattis is transformed once again—through material and lighting choices in the former show and a kaleidoscopic video presentation in the latter.

Though vastly different in subject matter and execution (Akhavan’s show is a sculptural installation, Owusu’s an expanded cinematic experience), both solo shows tackle displacement and cultural loss—as they pertain to objects and people—in deeply affecting and sensorially rich ways.



Abbas Akhavan, Installation view of 'cast for a folly,' 2019 at CCA Wattis Institute. (Courtesy of the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and The Third Line, Dubai; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

Warmly, dimly lit, Akhavan’s installation recreates a photograph taken in 2003 of the Iraq National Museum’s main lobby. After three days of looting during the Iraq War, thieves walked away with some 15,000 objects from the museum’s collection, including objects that were over 6,000 years old and heavier than 500 pounds. In addition to priceless artifacts, the looters took computers and office furniture, emptied a safe of employees’ salaries and stole the research director’s camera collection.

“It was a place of protection left exposed, cavernous and bare,” reads Wattis curator Kim Nguyen’s accompanying essay. Assembled within the main gallery, the photograph-turned-three-dimensional-space feels vast and hollow. Its emptiness is enhanced, not lessened, by the detritus Akhavan faithfully approximates, either because these objects are often so materially “off” or because they’re made from enlarged versions of low resolution images, dissolving into enormous pixels.

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Pails, a folding chair, a cob sculpture of a lion (a time-honored building material made from soil, water and straw) and hunks of foam litter the gallery. Everything is coated in a discernible layer of dust. In one quadrant, a pile of grass cut from decommissioned military sites accumulates over the course of the exhibition’s run, the springy smell of which ebbs and flows depending on the date of the last deposit.



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Will Rumpelstiltskin arrive to spin the growing pile of “straw” into gold?

With its moody lighting, gray walls and large-scale furniture, there’s a fairy-tale quality to the installation (of the Grimm variety, not a sanitized and sparkling Disney adaptation). It’s a fitting atmosphere for an show that presents, obliquely, the results of American hubris, the likes of which we see again and again. In this case, it’s American troops’ failure to protect the museum, and Donald Rumsfeld’s joking response to the looting: “My goodness, were there that many vases?” The collection’s fate and *cast for a folly* become stand-ins for an even-larger failure: the Iraq War.

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Meanwhile, Owusu’s exhibition gathers four films—*Me Broni Ba*, *Split Ends*, *I Feel Wonderful*, *Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us* and *White Afro*—a decade’s-worth of the Ghanaian-American artist’s work, and presents them as a gallery installation for the first time. The fractured display, with one large screen angled towards the back gallery’s entrance, an L-shaped series of projections fanning out behind it, perfectly echoes Owusu’s approach to her subject matter, which she describes as informed by her own “triple consciousness.”

This is the artist’s expansion on W.E.B. Du Bois’ idea of “double consciousness,” the sense, as a Black American, of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” For Owusu, the American-born child of Ghanaian expatriates, her viewpoint is shaped by, as Nguyen writes, being “too Ghanaian for America, and too American for Ghana.” Her films include viewpoints Du Bois omitted: feminism, queerness and immigrant consciousness.



Akosua Adoma Owusu, Installation view of 'Welcome to the Jungle,' 2019 at CCA Wattis Institute; 'White Afro' (detail), 2019. (Courtesy of the artist; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

Mingling documentary footage, personal narratives, American pop culture, advertisements, sound and special effects, Owusu's pieces are mesmerizing—I dare you to stay for just one. In a section of *Me Broni Ba*, an abstracted portrait of Ghanaian hair salons, Owusu spins in graceful slow motion, her braids flying, her necklaces tracing glittering arcs of centripetal force.

As Owusu maps the legacies of colonialism, colorism and racism across the United States, Ghana and Brazil, hair—and white notions of beauty—is a frequent focus. In Ghana, Black women learn to braid on white baby dolls imported from the West. In *White Afro*, an archival instructional film demonstrates how to give a white, straight-haired woman an Afro. But alongside loss and appropriation there's also celebration: *Split Ends*, a dense collage of found footage, shows groups of Black women braiding each other's hair, set to what's described as a "funktastic soundtrack."

For Akhavan and Owusu, spaces (like the Iraq National Museum or the Black hair salon) that have been subjected to injury and appropriation can also be spaces for healing. This healing happens in the third place: not the Iraq National Museum, nor in the new homes of its looted objects, but in the approximated space of the Wattis exhibition. Not in Black or white America, but in Owusu's cinematic space. Their disconnect from reality, facilitated by the Wattis' slippery shell, invites us all to engage in difficult conversations about complicity and responsibility, acknowledging different perspectives of a shared history—activities that might seem otherwise impossible outside those doors.



Abbas Akhavan's 'cast for a folly' and Akosua Adoma Owusu's *Welcome to the Jungle* are on view at San Francisco's Wattis Institute through July 27. [Details here.](#)

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