Experiments from Nature

A cornucopia of human figures—some nude, some clothed—mingle in a bucolic landscape, their bodies touching and layered (Fig. 1). Several appear in the throes of ecstasy, backs arched, while others are sanguine and pleasantly relaxed. Detached body parts—an open red-lipped mouth, a breast—also appear like molded features of the fantastical terrain. An abundance of fruits and flowers and a cloud of fluttering butterflies surround the gathering. Other playful, mysterious moments arise: a giant piece of kale stands upright like a towering, leafy tree…and is that iconic ’90s supermodel Naomi Campbell wearing an oversized white collar?

This amalgamated world, titled Sunday, Sitting on the Bank of Butterfly Meadow, is one of many compositions that New York-based artist Wardell Milan devises in his studio by building tabletop dioramas with found imagery and other props, which he then photographs. Milan excels at crafting scenes of disarming beauty and strangeness that initially seduce viewers, but then induce deeper reflection as concerns of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, surface. As Milan describes,

“I aim to spawn new conversations in these collages that I’m making about identity and representation, and also about the photographic medium and my relationship to it.”

Sunday, Sitting on the Bank of Butterfly Meadow, first created in 2013, is adapted to a monumental scale and shown outdoors in deCordova’s Sculpture Park as part of our rotation of PLATFORM billboard commissions. This lush, oversized scene offers a heightened reality and a surreal mirroring of activities in the Park, as nearby visitors may also be picnicking, seated with friends and family members, and warming themselves in the mid-day sun. At top right, Milan has included a glittering gold trapezoidal monolith that recalls Constantin Brancusi’s Endless Column (1918), and which draws connections between his imagined terrain and deCordova’s nearby sculptures.

Sunday is the first work of an extended series by Milan titled Parisian Landscapes. Through different “chapters,” the series samples constructions of landscape in visual art and literature, from the pastoral paintings of Jean-Antoine Watteau to the idealizations of nature in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay Nature.
The famed Transcendentalist, who lived in neighboring Concord, first delivered *Nature* as a series of lectures in Boston, following his travels to Paris. The City of Love also features in the title of Milan's series, given its associations with unbridled romance. Unlike Emerson, however, Milan has not (yet) traveled to France's capital, preferring to keep his fantasies of Paris intact until finishing this body of work. Presented in deCordova's Sculpture Park, Milan's allusion to Paris and inspiration from Emerson combine in a hyperbolic terrain of nature and desire.

Milan's photographs, collages, and drawings collide dreams and reality by joining myriad found-photographic references via his inward studio process. He collages fragments of photographs by earlier masters, from Robert Mapplethorpe to Diane Arbus, laying bear his influences and inserting himself into the coded history of photography. In *Sunday*, the largest seated figure at left is cut from Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Juvisy, France, 1938*, also known as *Sunday on the banks of the River Seine*, an iconic photograph of urban workers resting along a riverbank in the suburbs of Paris (Fig. 2). This image bears an understated political message; photography curator Peter Galassi notes that the original photograph had been intended as “a bit of soft propaganda for the Popular Front's [France's Communist Party] triumph of bringing leisure to the working class.”

If Cartier-Bresson’s photograph visually advocated for working class people and their need for relaxation and time away from work, Milan’s escapist tableau moves into new territory. He has constructed a fantasy world outside of time and space, where the snippet of Cartier-Bresson’s urban workers interacts with an array of others experiencing deep pleasure. Here the full variety can be embedded within seemingly candid photographs.
of human experience and photographic representation coexist simultaneously. At the zenith of the composition stands a male nude with legs crossed, hands on hips, looking down upon the other bodies in various states of revelry and exchange. This is Leigh Bowery, an iconic performance artist, fashion designer, and promoter of the queer club scene in London during the 1980s. Populating his imagined worlds with people of diverse genders and ethnicities, particularly with queer bodies and men of color, is a crucial motif in Milan’s work. Bowery looms above fashion models from Dolce & Gabbana ads as well as snapshots of the artist’s young parents, indicating the influence of queer culture on commercial advertising as well as Milan’s personal life.

The methods of photomontage make this broad messaging possible, while also conveying more radical commentary. Photomontage is often considered a satirical or irreverent approach to art making with its origins in the late 1910s among Dadaists in Germany. Think of the visual anarchy in Hannah Höch’s *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919), (Fig. 3) a work that energetically juxtaposes riotous imagery to express the failures and fragmentation of modern German society following World War I. Milan, fully aware of such earlier precedents, has harnessed the montage process and its political potential to explore the construction of identity and self-presentation in
our time. In other artworks Milan combines photographed body parts and facial features of different subjects to form unnerving, seductive portraits. These works derive from a particular line of thinking: “How can I use the eye or nose of one gender or race and then add that with the gender or race of another to create this amalgamation of a portrait, in an effort to speak about the complicated ways in which one’s personality is constructed; one’s gender and sexuality is a multitude of things, it’s not just straight or gay, but it’s all the things that exist between those two poles, as well as race and ethnicity, how one’s race and ethnicity are made up of a multitude of other races and ethnicities.”

In Sunday and other works, Milan also deploys collage methods to stir conversation about the eroticism of nude male bodies and our biases in viewing their form across artistic media. He has included a photograph of the Barberini Faun, a marble sculpture created during Greece’s Hellenistic period (Figs. 4 & 5). In languid repose with legs splayed, the male faun is not a sexual aggressor, but an available object of desire. While pointing to the presence of desire in classical male nude sculptures, Milan’s work also leads us to consider the distinction between Greco-Roman sculpture of male bodies and contemporary photographs of naked men. Whereas examples of the former are lifted upon pedestals in the halls of great museums, contemporary erotic imagery of fully frontal nude men, particularly men of color, is often far less elevated. While representations of black men in contemporary culture are frequently sexualized to the point of objectification, Milan furthers his radical vision by openly presenting black masculinity and sexuality in a way that honors desire, pleasure, and diversity as part of the continuum of all human life.

Throughout Sunday, Milan includes various types of bodies, from clothed to naked, male to female, and from commercial ads to avant-garde photography. His world integrates diverse groups of people and levels image hierarchies. Milan’s work reinforces, on the one hand, the democratizing potential of photography, and, on the other, its strong capacity to induce desire. Bringing together varied depictions of pleasure amid a whimsical landscape, his work returns us to one of the very first moments of photography’s invention, when in an 1828 letter to his collaborator Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre wrote, “I am burning with desire to see your experiments from nature.”

Sarah Montross, Curator


III: Wardell Milan in video interview.

CAPTIONS


Fig. 1: Wardell Milan, *Sunday, Sitting on the Bank of Butterfly Meadow* (Detail), 2013, chromogenic print, 20 ½ x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2: Henri Cartier-Bresson (French, 1908 – 2004), *Sunday on the banks of the River Seine*, 1938, gelatin silver print, © 2019 Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos.

Fig. 3: Hannah Höch (German, 1889 -1978), *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919, collage, 114 x 90 cm, NG 57/61, bpk, Berlin / Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY, © 2019, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Fig. 4: Wardell Milan, *Sunday, Sitting on the Bank of Butterfly Meadow* (Detail), 2013, chromogenic print, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 5: “Barberini Faun,” c. 220 B.C.E., Hellenistic period, marble, 2.15 meters, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, Munich, Image: Manfred Bail/imageBROKER.
BIOGRAPHY

Milan was born 1978 in Knoxville, TN and lives and works in New York, NY. He earned a BFA from the University of Tennessee in 2001 and an MFA in Photography at Yale University, New Haven, CT in 2004. His work has been exhibited at The Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; MoMA PS1, Queens, NY; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA; and David Nolan Gallery, New York, NY. In 2003 he was an artist in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and was awarded The Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award in 2007.

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RELATED EVENTS

Wardell Milan Lecture, Lesley University
September 25, 6:00—7:00pm
Lesley Art + Design present a lecture by Wardell Milan in partnership with deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Listen to Milan as he elaborates on his working process, the intersection of media in his work, and his career path to today.

Picnic and Conversation with Wardell Milan
September 26, 12:00—1:00pm
Join artist Wardell Milan for a picnic and conversation in the Park, where we will channel the pastoral energy from his billboard commission Sunday, Sitting on the Bank of Butterfly Hill.