

## EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

### *The Progress of Love*

Edited by Kristina Van Dyke and Bisi Silva, with additional contributions by Elias K. Bongmba, Francesca Consagra, and Banning Eyre

188 pp., 141 color illustrations; \$55

Available at the Menil Bookstore

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS AT THE MENIL

### *Shades of Love: A Conversation*

Thursday, January 10, 2013, 7:00 p.m.

Exhibition curator Kristina Van Dyke is joined by Mahen Bonetti, founder and director of African Film Festival Inc., and director Andrew Dosunmu

to discuss *Shades of Love: Romance in Contemporary African Cinema*.

The eight-part series of African films will be shown in the Brown

Auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston beginning January 11.

Details and full schedule at [menil.org](http://menil.org)

### *Radio Kaduna*

Saturday, February 16, 2013, 7:00 p.m.

Co-presented with Aurora Picture Show

In this live performance with video, artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji explores

true love in a Muslim-Christian household in pre-independence Nigeria.

Visit the project website at

[theprogressoflove.com](http://theprogressoflove.com)

*The Progress of Love* is a collaborative project between the Menil Collection, Houston; the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos; and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis.

### **The Menil Collection, Houston**

December 2, 2012–March 17, 2013

### **Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos**

October 13, 2012–January 27, 2013

### **The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis**

November 16, 2012–April 20, 2013

Curated by Kristina Van Dyke, Director of the Pulitzer Foundation, and Bisi Silva, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos

In Houston, this exhibition is generously supported by The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis; Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Bill and Sara Morgan; David and Anne Kirkland; Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Bérengère Primat; Clare Casademont and Michael Metz; Haynes Whaley Associates, Inc.; Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P.; Gensler; Phillips de Pury & Company; proceeds from Men of Menil; Carriage Glass & Co.; and the City of Houston.

cover:

Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001. Dutch Wax-printed textile, life-sized mannequin, swing, and artificial foliage, approx. 130 x 138 x 87 inches (330.2 x 350.5 x 221 cm). Tate, Purchased 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2012 Yinka Shonibare, MBE

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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# The PROGRESS of LOVE

THE MENIL COLLECTION December 2, 2012–March 17, 2013

**WHAT ASPECTS OF LOVE ARE UNIVERSAL?** What parts are timeless? What roles do technology, economic systems, and other cultural forces play in our understanding of love? In our increasingly globalized world, are ideas about love coming into closer alignment across the Atlantic? Developed through an intercontinental conversation, *The Progress of Love* explores our ever-changing conceptions and experiences of love, from romantic love, self-love, and friendship to familial affect and love of one's country. With overlapping exhibitions and programs at the Menil Collection, Houston; the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos; and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis, as well as a shared website and publication, works by artists from many different locales are put into dialogue, offering a range of perspectives on the subject.

The title of this project comes from a 1771–72 cycle of paintings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard that depicts a narrative of love from initial pursuit to attainment. At the time he was working, the printing press, increasing literacy, and nascent imperialism, among other factors, were bringing new ideas about individual agency and leisure into being in ways that redefined and expanded the idea of love, particularly romantic love. While earlier artists certainly depicted love, it was veiled in allegory or myth, and Fragonard was among the first European artists to portray it as a contemporary phenomenon. This project inherits the tradition he spawned in exploring love and its representation as something specific to a time and place, in this case modern day Africa, Europe, and the United States. In considering the mechanisms by which ideas of love are circulated and the shared images and narratives they produce, *The Progress of Love* at the Menil explores how concepts of love are reshaped through the forces of “progress,” including a globalized economy and technologies that make simultaneous communication possible in ways never previously imagined.

Love is circulated, shaped, and expressed through a variety of cultural systems and mediums, including telecommunications networks, the Internet, and perhaps foremost among them, language. The mechanism through which we strive for mutual recognition and intelligibility, it is both expansive and restrictive, and several artists in the exhibition address this incongruity in their work. Zoulikha Bouabdellah's *Chéri*, 2007, comprises over three hundred sheets of paper on which different Arabic words for love are written in red lacquer. Organized in a grid-like formation, itself a metaphor for the structuring role of language, *Chéri* speaks to the way language functions as a framework for imagining the possibilities of love and defining its forms, prompting viewers to consider how their own native tongue expands or restricts personal notions of love.

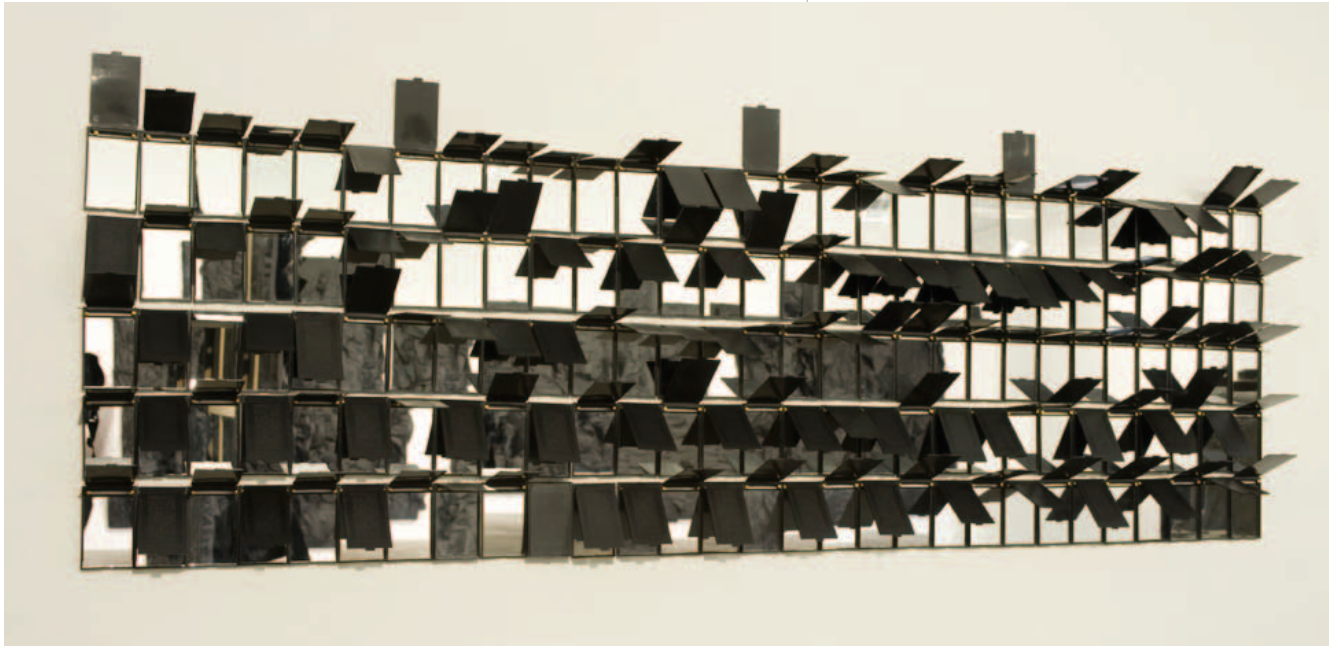
South Africa-born Kendell Geers also looks at the effects of language on our conception of love, but with a focus on the way translation or the adoption of a second tongue alters one's emotional limits and possibilities. For the series *Ritual Slips*, 2010, Geers collaborated with a group of



Kendell Geers, *Ritual Slip (iMopoto) VII*, 2010. Leather and glass beads, 20½ x 14¾ inches (52 x 37 cm). Collection of Janice Niemi and Dennis Braddock. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. © 2012 Kendell Geers

Ndebele women in South Africa to create a set of works that reference the traditional aprons that were once used to demarcate a woman's changing social status, from puberty to marriage to motherhood to menopause. The artist abstracted English words for various states and emotions, such as love, hate, trust, etc., into graphic patterns that were then critiqued by the Ndebele and modified by Geers. The Ndebele collective then selected a number of these patterns and beaded them onto aprons. In the resulting works, the letters are clearly visible, but the words remain just out of reach.

The act of putting English on these aprons, strong signifiers of Ndebele ethnicity and womanhood that have been widely marketed to tourists and collectors, makes one consider other shifts the culture has experienced. The move from the bride-wealth system based on cattle that once underpinned the production of these aprons to a globalized monetary economy contributed to the demise of the aprons' use in Ndebele culture, with attendant alterations in definitions of womanhood and marriage.



Joël Andrianomearisoa, *Darling you can make my dreams come true if you say you love me too*, 2010. Installation of 150 pocket mirrors, approx. 31½ x 78¾ inches (80 x 200 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. © 2012 Joël Andrianomearisoa

In *Long Distance Lover*, 1999–2000, Senam Okudzeto explores how the dramatic increase in global telecommunications systems has made new types of relationships possible. The work depicts entangled figures painted on the artist's British Telecom bills. With calls placed to Israel, Greece, Russia, Ghana, and elsewhere, one starts to wonder just who the phone's owner is; what locale she might call home; and how she manages to sustain such far-flung relationships, the nature of which remain unclear. The technology at the center of *Long Distance Lover* is of particular significance on the continent of Africa, where landlines were by and large leapfrogged by cell phones, radically changing the codes of communication. Both in Africa and elsewhere, with cell phones and the Internet it is no longer necessary to be in the same place at the same time in order to participate in relationships. On a local level, this allows for one to circumvent parental or cultural controls on public behavior. On a larger scale, it allows one to maintain and develop relationships in real time at a distance that would have been unimaginable only a decade ago.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to think about love without the central framing devices and imagined narratives provided by media, cultural conceptions of love that allow one to aspire to it, gauge one's progress in it, and process its aftermath when lost. Yet these images are not absorbed passively; they are appropriated, reshaped, and sometimes even rejected.

Samuel Fosso, for example, rehearses a well-established nineteenth-century art historical convention: the odalisque, a nude woman displayed on a bed with drapery. In his untitled photograph, Fosso replaces the female form with his own body, producing an enigmatic image that at once seems to be a celebratory act of inserting himself into a long tradition of staging objects of desire, an act of self-love bordering on narcissism, and an implicit critique, hinting that it is the viewer who frames him this way. Fosso's work calls attention to the international history of the gaze of desire and the ways in which one can reshape that image.

More recently, South African Zanele Muholi has tapped into filmic conventions in a series from 2007. The photographs read as film stills with the subject, Miss D'vine, appearing in a minidress and red heels in a field or climbing a flight of the stairs in a nondescript, concrete space clad in similarly glamorous attire. There is something incongruous about Miss D'vine, a gender queer, and these banal locations, as if Muholi is posing questions about who belongs in or conceptually owns them. She makes us consider the ways in which even the most innocuous spaces are culturally coded and asserts Miss D'vine's presence there. Muholi has dedicated much of her artistic practice to making the lives of South Africa's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered population visible, and her work is an act of protest deeply rooted in love for these communities.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the reworking of an inherited image of love is provided by Yinka Shonibare, MBE, a primary inspiration for this project. The artist addresses issues of race, class, and colonialism/postcolonialism—particularly as they pertain to the complicated relationship between Europe and Africa—by reproducing iconic scenes from western art, history, and literature, subverted by the inclusion of African elements. In sculptures and installations such as *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001, he has recast Fragonard's painted subjects as headless mannequins with garments made of bold, pseudo-traditional fabrics. In so doing, Shonibare calls attention to the ways in which global economic forces participated in European notions of romantic, heterosexual, couple-centered love and asserts that definitions of love in the West and in Africa have long been, and remain, contingent.

As with Muholi's photographs, many of the works in the exhibition can be characterized as acts of self-love or love for one's community. For *The Progress of Love* Romuald Hazoumé has developed a project called



Zanele Muholi, *Miss D'vine II*, 2007. Chromogenic print, 30⅞ x 30⅞ inches (76.5 x 76.5 cm). Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg. © 2012 Zanele Muholi

ONG SBOP (*Organisation non gouvernementale, Solidarité béninoise pour occidentaux en péri*), which launched on Valentine's Day, 2011. A non-governmental organization that has partnered with celebrities in Benin and is staffed by Beninois, its mission is to help westerners live better lives. The project not only offers a critique of western charity and considers the intersections between love, money, and politics inherent in the structure of NGOs, which are of major significance in Africa, but it also creates self-respect and -love in the way it reorients Beninois to see themselves as donors instead of recipients.

The work joins in an important conversation with that of Mary Ellen Carroll, whose 2007 neon pieces spell out the phrases "Blacks Like Me" and "Me Like Blacks." Referencing the Civil Rights-era book *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin, Carroll's art explores the thin line between empathy and overidentification. *Black Like Me* is the account of a white man who went undercover as an African American and reported the way he was treated, or rather mistreated. The book raises questions about the degree to which it is possible to see from another's point of view and suggests that, at best, the view is only partial. Empathy, imagining another's perspective, takes their otherness into account, whereas overidentification appropriates another's subjectivity and risks buying into the false notion of complete mirroring. While Hazoumé addresses the shortfalls of salving the wound of economic inequity with money, Carroll's jarring text points out the serious effort that is required to imagine, as opposed to identify with, another's position. Her work is also vital in bringing race relations to the fore in an exhibition where various interracial relationships are depicted and enacted, as well as calling attention to white viewers' gazes in an exhibition full of black bodies.

The inability to completely reflect or see another is a theme that also emerges in Joël Andrianomearisoa's *Darling you can make my dreams come true if you say you love me too*, 2010. Composed of 150 compact mirrors opened to varying angles, one's encounter with this work results in a fractured reflection of the self, suggesting the ways in which the demands we make on others for completion can never be fully met. Similarly, in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991, two battery-operated clocks are set to the same time at the start of the exhibition, but over the course of its duration they fall out of sync.

**LOVE IS AN AFFIRMATIVE RECOGNITION** of another's existence. It can be given or received. It need not be reciprocated. You can love an object or an idea that cannot love you back or someone who does not return your feelings. Whether giving, receiving, or both, one feels decidedly more alive when participating in love. In an increasingly globalized world, with expansive film and music cultures, the Internet, and the cell phone, it would seem that certain romantic ideals and conventions of friendship and



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Me Like Blacks*, 2007. Neon sign, 90 x 90 x 6 inches (228.6 x 228.6 x 15.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist; Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; Power House Memphis; and Third Streaming, New York. © 2012 Mary Ellen Carroll. Photo: Peter Fleissig

familial love have become more similar and less localized. Yet important differences still exist. The specificity of language, culturally inherited mores and traditions, and access to technology limit and expand the expression of love in various places. By bringing together African, African diasporic, American, and European artists whose work addresses love at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one is put in a position to look across any abyss at distant notions of love. *The Progress of Love* in all its guises is thus about connection. Despite some very real differences in our conceptions and experiences of love, we share more than we might have supposed.

*Adapted from Kristina Van Dyke's essay "Love and Africa" in the exhibition catalogue.*