

THREE-PART, TRANSATLANTIC EXHIBITION

THE PROGRESS OF LOVE

TO EXPLORE HOW TODAY'S AFRICAN ARTISTS REFLECT ON
UNIVERSAL EMOTIONS IN A CHANGING GLOBAL SOCIETY

The Menil Collection, The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, and the
Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos Offer Distinct but Related Presentations

Progress of Love Microsite Connects Triple-Venue Project

On View at the Menil Collection in Houston December 2, 2012 – March 17, 2013; The Pulitzer
Foundation for the Arts November 16, 2012 – April 20, 2013; and the Centre for Contemporary
Art, Lagos, October 13, 2012 – January 27, 2013

Houston, December 12, 2012 — In an unprecedented collaboration, arts institutions in three
cities and on two continents will join together to explore the changing modes and meanings of
love in today's global society, as seen by more than two dozen contemporary artists from Africa
and a select few of their counterparts from Europe and America.

To further this rare global partnership, a newly launched exhibition microsite now enables and
enhances the visitor experience of the triple-venue exhibition: www.theprogressoflove.com.

Through April 2013, the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos in Nigeria, the Pulitzer
Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Menil Collection in Houston will each
offer distinct but related presentations of *The Progress of Love*. The three concurrent
presentations constitute a narrative arc, embracing love as an ideal, love as a lived experience,
and love as something lost.

The Progress of Love at the Menil Collection (on view through March 17, 2013) reveals how
artists in Africa today are questioning, reflecting, and challenging received images and norms of
love—sexual, familial, friendly, communal—as derived both from traditional culture and
Western influences. The way these aspirations and expectations about love play out in the real
world—between and among partners, friends, and families—is the theme of *The Progress of
Love* at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, which will present a series of performative

exhibitions, performances, and film screenings through January 27, 2013. The end of love is the exhibition theme at The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts (on view through April 20, 2013). "With our partner institutions we are presenting an unprecedented gathering of works that prompt us to think more clearly and seriously about the meaning of love, in all its expressions and manifestations," said Menil Director Josef Helfenstein. "The fact that the impetus for this rethinking comes primarily from artists in today's Africa and its diaspora broadens the understanding that our emotional lives have a history, just as our public affairs do – with similarities, differences, and cross-currents. I believe that *The Progress of Love* will open eyes and hearts and minds."

According to Kristina Van Dyke, former curator for collections and research at the Menil Collection and now the director of The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, one of the points of origin of the three-part exhibition—and the inspiration for its title—is a body of sculptural installations by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare (born 1962) based on paintings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. In these works, the artist dressed headless mannequins in "African" garb in place of Fragonard's courtly 18th-century European figures to suggest the ways in which Africa was implicitly present in a burgeoning leisure class's concepts of love.

"This exhibition is very much inspired by Shonibare's exploration of how historical and contemporary forces affect people's concept of love," Van Dyke states. "It is particularly concerned with the question of how technological 'progress' is reshaping our understanding of love, in Africa as well as in Europe and America."

The Progress of Love is co-organized by Kristina Van Dyke and Bisi Silva, independent curator and director of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos. The Pulitzer presentation of the exhibition was assisted by Francesca Herndon-Consagra, Senior Curator of Prints, Drawings, and European Paintings at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Timeless" Love in Changing Circumstances

Central to *The Progress of Love* is the recognition that this most natural and universal of emotions has actually evolved over the centuries, finding different expressions, meanings, and norms in different circumstances. In the case of romantic love—the ideal of a lifelong bond between individuals who choose one another, subsuming sexual desire in an emotional compact—it is even possible to speak of love's having been invented, popularized, and exported.

Scholars trace the literary beginnings of the romantic ideal to the 12th century and the courtly poets in the circle of Marie of France, Countess of Champagne. The visual representation of romantic love among recognizably modern people (as distinguished from historic, literary, or allegorical figures) began in the 18th century, finding one of its first expressions in the cycle of paintings that gives this transatlantic exhibition its title: “The Progress of Love” (1771-72) by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (The Frick Collection, New York).

As Van Dyke notes, Fragonard created these works in a period when the ideal of romantic love was spreading in Western Europe, concurrent with an expansion of the popular press and a significant increase in wealth and leisure, the latter made possible by vast mercantile profits from colonial possessions and the African slave trade. “It seems that one cannot separate a discrete notion of love in the West from life and love in Africa,” Van Dyke comments. “We have been informing one another’s ideas about love for centuries.”

At The Menil Collection: Global Systems of Love

The Progress of Love at the Menil presents works by more than 20 artists from Africa, Europe, and America and examines the ways in which language, mass media, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic forces foster images and expectations about love. The exhibition pays particular attention to the effects of the digital era, asking whether our ideas about love are now coming into closer alignment across the Atlantic.

Among the 56 works presented at the Houston museum are three commissioned pieces. *ONG SBOP* by Romuald Hazoumé documents a new project in which the artist established a non-governmental organization in Benin and invited his fellow Beninois to express love for self and others by making contributions to help people in the West lead better lives. *This is Lagos II* by Emeka Ogboh is a sound installation that brings public and private conversations in Lagos to Houston, and in particular to its Nigerian expatriate community. *Eaten By The Heart* by Zina Saro-Wiwa is a video installation with a web component showing vignettes of a common activity—kissing—that is frequently represented to the Western public but is seldom shown when the lovers are African.

“The works in this exhibition offer a broad range of images and narratives of love that we have inherited over time and across cultures,” said Kristina Van Dyke. “*The Progress of Love* offers viewers the opportunity to consider how they gauge their own experiences of love through its historical and contemporary conventions and expressions – and to compare their experiences to those in Africa today.”

At the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos: The Lived Experience of Love

The Progress of Love at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos explores contemporary expressions of love with an emphasis on the performative, highlighting the growing interest in live art in Nigeria. The presentation also opens up the possibility for dialogue and interaction that may challenge audiences to rethink prejudices, expand possibilities, and engage with and in all the ways love can affect lives. It will conclude with an interactive exhibition by Temitayo Ogunbiyi, based on the popular Nigerian phenomenon of sending pre-formatted love notes by text message. Inspired by personal experiences, tradition, technology, and literature, artists represented in this presentation within *The Progress of Love* express loss, absence, pain, and difference, and in so doing invoke memory, challenge prejudice, and articulate togetherness in very personal ways.

According to Bisi Silva, the exhibition “marks an important curatorial and thematic shift in the presentation of contemporary art from across Africa by highlighting the complexity with which a universal emotion is expressed – as well as revealing how societal changes affect the way we engage with love today.”

At The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts: Love as Mourning

The Progress of Love at The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts explores the end of love’s spectrum. This section of the exhibition features works by the Nigerian artists Zina Saro-Wiwa and Yinka Shonibare (both also included in the Menil presentation) and by the French artist Sophie Calle.

Two parts of Yinka Shonibare’s *Addio del Passato* (2012) will be shown: a photograph based on Henry Wallis’s painting *The Death of Chatterton* (1856, The Tate Collection, London), and a film scored with an aria from Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Shonibare substitutes images of Lord Horatio Nelson and his betrayed wife Frances for the doomed young poet and heartbroken courtesan in the original works, turning these romantic tragedies into eulogies for the death of the imperial West. *Mourning Class* (2010-11) by Zina Saro-Wiwa is a multi-screen video presentation of a lamentation ritual devised by the artist, in memory of her brother and her renowned activist father, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Finally, the exhibition will present *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) by Sophie Calle, a multimedia installation first shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale, documenting the responses of 107 women to a break-up letter the artist had received from her lover, via e-mail. This will be the first presentation of *Take Care of Yourself* in a U.S. art institution.

Publications

The Progress of Love will be documented by a fully illustrated catalogue, including essays by Van Dyke, Silva, and Herndon-Consagra. Other contributors include Elias Bongmba, Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University; and Banning Eyre, Senior Editor at AfroPop.org.

This exhibition is generously supported by 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, Michael Zilkha, Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P., Gensler, proceeds from Men of Menil, and the City of Houston.

The presentation by Wura-Natasha Ogunji is supported by a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

The Progress of Love is being underwritten at CCA, Lagos by The Menil Collection and The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts.

Contact:

Vance Muse or Gretchen Sammons
Menil Press Office
press@menil.org or 713-535-3170

The Menil Collection

Considered one of the most important privately assembled collections of the twentieth century, the Menil Collection opened officially on June 4, 1987, and is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. The Menil's holdings, ranging from the prehistoric to art of the present day, are housed in a modern landmark designed by the renowned architect Renzo Piano. In the quarter-century since it opened to the public, the Menil has established an international reputation for presenting acclaimed exhibitions and producing many highly respected scholarly publications; pioneering partnerships with other cultural and education institutions across Houston, Texas and the United States; and conducting groundbreaking research into the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The Menil charges no admission fees. For more information about the Menil Collection, visit: www.menil.org.

The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts

Through art exhibitions, programs, collaborations, and exchanges with other institutions, the Pulitzer aims to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of art and architecture and is a resource for artists, architects, scholars, students, and the general public. The Pulitzer is open and free to the public Wednesdays from noon to 5 pm and Saturdays from 10 am to 5 pm. The Pulitzer is located at 3716 Washington Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63108. For more information about The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, visit www.pulitzerarts.org or call 314-754-1850.

Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA, Lagos)

Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA, Lagos) is an independent, non-profit visual art organization that provides a platform for the development, presentation, and discussion of contemporary visual art and culture, with a focus on Nigeria and the West African region. It prioritizes new media and experimental visual art practice such as photography, animation, film and video, performance art, and installation art, all of which have been underrepresented in contemporary Nigerian artistic practice. Through the use of its exhibition space and a visual arts library, CCA, Lagos presents a diverse program of public exhibitions, workshops, talks, seminars, performances and film screenings. For more information, please visit: <http://ccalagos.org>