

# BLOUINARTINFO

## “A Curious Blindness” at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University

BY Mostafa Heddaya | May 18, 2015



Installation view of "A Curious Blindness." (Vivian Chui)

A five-panel series depicting, in X-ray style, the formal similarities between a gasoline pump and a human torso holding a gun to its head welcomes those arriving at Columbia University's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery. The work, whose context is revealed by the identity of its producer, the Saudi conceptualist Ahmed Mater, is part of "A Curious Blindness," the university gallery's annual exhibition curated by its critical and curatorial studies masters students. Combining the two best student proposals from this year's graduating cohort, as selected by an anonymous faculty committee, the exhibition (through June 13) reveals an enduring curatorial interest in the question of identity politics. This sort of identitarian approach has long come in for scrutiny, with Hal Foster's 1982 excoriation of "aesthetic pleasure as false consciousness, or vice versa" in "Against Pluralism" being among the most widely cited. The students' work is thus cut out for them: how to acknowledge the intellectual minefield of this genre while providing adequate context for a survey of contemporary practitioners?

Three curatorial wall texts at the Wallach seem to acknowledge the limitations of an undifferentiated (or purely ahistorical) consideration of marginal identity — one is headlined "The Glamour of Difference Sells Well" — and the exhibition does well to rescue, at least paradigmatically, the concerns raised by Foster and others. The work on hand ranges widely, with standouts including "My dreams, my works must wait 'til after hell..." 2011, by Girl (Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh), a seven-minute video depicting a brown female torso whose head is obscured by a pile of rocks, accompanied by kitschy Eastern flute music; mordantly comical photographic mise-en-scènes by Suntek Chung; and a Coogi abstraction from Jayson Musson, a reliable classic that trades in an effective simplicity of conceit. Sondra Perry's series "White

Sheets,” 2014, depicting a black female torso gesturing from beneath a white veil, is endowed with further curatorial punch as an echo of Mater’s work across the gallery.

Similar, if less successful, formal doublings are seen in the recurring preoccupation with eyes and bodily forms in a number of other works. Indeed, if there’s anything to be said about this particular assortment of works, it is that it feels remarkably conservative, despite the stated interest in expanding the aesthetic field of “identity politics” beyond the rudely figurative and representational. As the effort of an elite cohort of curatorial students, however (the exhibition is curated by Vivian Chui, Tara Kuruvilla, and Doris Zhao), “A Curious Blindness” represents an intellectually rigorous rehabilitation of a tired yet promising subject area.