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Review: 'A Curious Blindness' at Wallach Art Gallery

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#) MAY 7, 2015



Paul Anthony Smith's "Port Antonio Market #3" (2013), at the Wallach at Columbia. Credit Paul Anthony Smith, Zieher Smith & Horton, New York

If, as it is sometimes said, we live in a postracial era, why are reports about race and racial conflict in the news every day? This is more or less the question asked by three students in the critical and curatorial studies program at Columbia University — Vivian Chui, Tara Kuruvilla and Doris Zhao — in a cogent group exhibition called "[A Curious Blindness](#)." The show brings together 18 young artists focusing on the functional fantasies that revolve around race and the purported colorblindness it engenders.

Expediency is the bottom line. Calling attention to racial difference is useful for prestige marketing. [Rashaad Newsome](#) turns assemblages of hip-hop bling into royal coats of arms. [Jayson Musson](#) unravels [Coogi](#) sweaters, made popular by Bill Cosby on television in the 1980s and thereafter by the rap star Notorious B.I.G., and reworks the yarns into Abstract Expressionist-style paintings.

Colorblindness, in its turn, can be a way to devalue through erasure. In a series of paintings titled "Can I Pass? Introducing the Brown Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of December," [Firelei Báez](#) refers to an old method for determining acceptable shades of brownness to paint silhouette portraits of friends who are all given skin one color and are depicted as featureless apart from their eyes.

One of this exhibition's great strengths is that much of the art is not easy to parse. By scraping and painting photographs, [Paul Anthony Smith](#) turns people in his hometown, [Port Antonio, Jamaica](#), into clouds of scintillation. In a short video, Sondra Perry edits and [speeds up](#) a performance by two black figures so that the bodies vanish and only flickering dreadlocks aureoles remain. Such images defy ready translation, as does a remarkable multipanel video by [Hassan Hajjaj](#) called "My Rock Stars: Experimental, Volume I." In it, nine performers play music that stitches together hip-hop, North African devotional songs and jazz. The stitching, in the music as in the video, is tight, but the seams still show. This is a beautiful thing.

*Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University
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