

ROTTERDAM

Patricia Kaersenhout

WILFRIED LENTZ

In this exhibition, the Dutch artist and activist Patricia Kaersenhout poked at the power of portraiture to both enshrine and unseat. She paired images of privileged white men—traditionally guardians of the Western historical narrative—alongside new textile works that depict accomplished women of color, whom history has overlooked

or possibly wished to let be forgotten. “Objects of Love and Desire,” her title for both the show and the latter series, foregrounded the personal urgency and commitment with which she portrays her subjects, while offering the audience a sense of (overdue) celebration. Strung from wooden dowels in the middle of the gallery space, these four large assemblages on fabric were each dedicated to a woman of Caribbean descent noted for her achievement in a specific field of culture, academia or science: Solange Fitte-Duval, Amy Jacques Garvey, Una Marson, and Eslanda Goode Robeson. The obstacles they faced bind them together as women of action and impact.

torture—undercut the haughty confidence of the authoritarian figures in the portraits, who otherwise sit proudly and unchallenged. As the series progresses, the repetition of collective viciousness, against the singular representation of power, is both disturbing and deeply moving. The artist augments these portraits with embroidery and colored beads to penetrate and distort their subjects’ self-satisfied expressions. She delicately finishes each work with a lace border along the top and bottom, and adds entomological drawings of various native insects that crawl eerily across the entirety of the compositions, alluding to susceptibility and finality, as if the very ground they now all lie in will remain restless. These heroes find no escape here from their committed brutalities. With each stitch, Kaersenhout lays out the historical imbalance caused by these men, in all its beauty and violence.

—Huib Hays van der Werf



Patricia Kaersenhout, *Objects of Love and Desire: Solange Fitte-Duval*, 2019, digitally printed cotton, beads, African fabrics, wooden dowel, 74 3/4 x 54 3/4".

Kaersenhout honors this dynamism by depicting each woman in motion, mobilizing graphic tropes of Chinese propaganda posters that glorify labor and nature. However, Kaersenhout’s works are more complex and profound than their exemplars. She digitally printed the black-and-white portrait of each woman—dressed in Asian apparel and posed in lush natural surroundings—on cotton, later accentuating the fabric with a patchwork of colorful flowers and beaded embroidery. The intricate assembly and delicate hand stitching imbue the subjects with a softness and approachability that does not diminish the power of their presence. In *Objects of Love and Desire: Solange Fitte-Duval*, 2019, the eponymous figure—a pioneering twentieth-century crusader for women’s emancipation and education in Martinique—kneels alongside a pool of water. Her dreamy gaze leads the viewer’s eyes to a poem, titled *BLACK IS FANCY*, bordering the left edge of the image, but the flowers sewn over whole passages obscure a full reading of its verses. More than just decorative flourish, these plants refer to the seeds that slaves were said to have hidden in their hair during their forced journeys to the Caribbean from Africa.

Kaersenhout counterbalanced these new assemblages with an older series of textiles commissioned for the New Orleans-based biennial Prospect.4 in 2017. Hung along the gallery walls, these eight works—all prints on white cotton in colonial blue, and smaller in size than her newer pieces—each portray a male “hero” of the nineteenth-century American South. The series title, “No Names Please!,” makes clear that there is no cause for celebration here. Kaersenhout embeds brutal collaged depictions of the histories of (enslaved) peoples of color in each portrait’s background, all derived from historical sources. These chilling scenes of violence, bred from the industrial history of the South—mass graves, slave auctions, evidence of physical