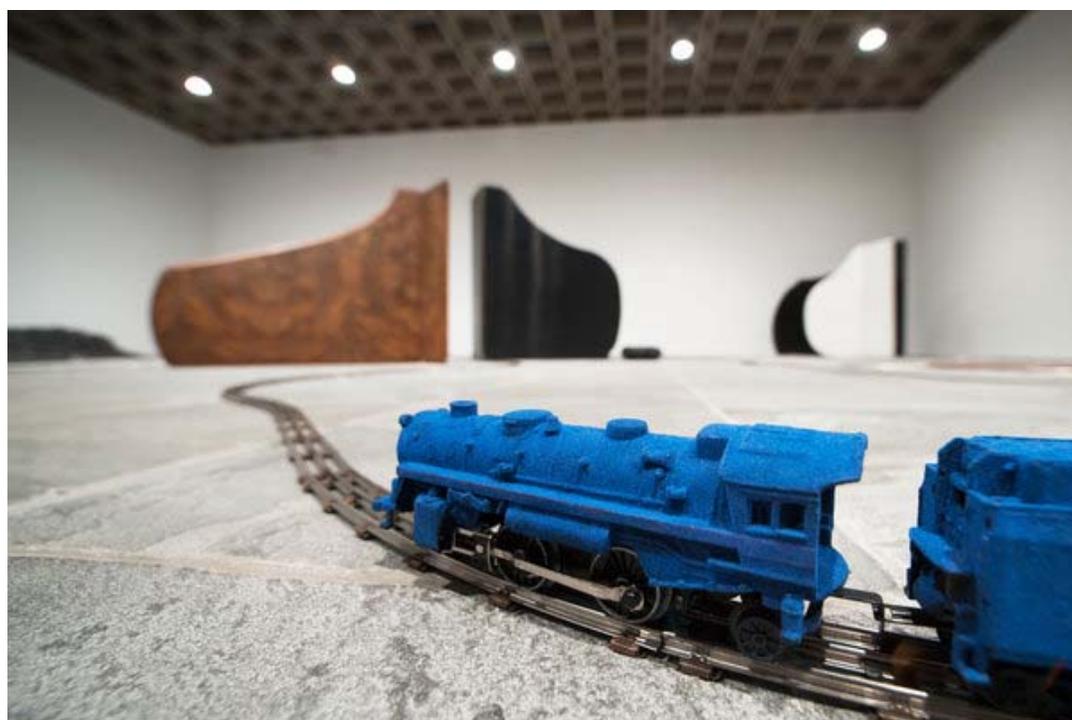


ART REVIEW

## Mood Indigo: A Playlist for the Mind 'Blues for Smoke' at the Whitney Museum



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

**Blues for Smoke** David Hammons's "Chasing the Blue Train" is in this Whitney show. [More Photos](#) »

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

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I grew up in a music-loving family. A lot of what we loved was blues of one kind or another, sung mostly by women: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Maria Callas. I thought of Callas as a blues singer who happened to do Verdi. She sang about love, death and rising up just as Bessie and Billie did.

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But it was how she sang that clinched it: with all of herself, out of her life, with an ache. It wasn't a pretty sound; there were scratches and shrieks. But you'd sit there hearing her wrestle her

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voice — her heart — to the ground, and suddenly out came the most beautiful note in the world, like a soul set free. That was the blues for me. Struggle, loss, joy, art that said: all of me.



You won't hear Callas's voice in the ambient music that nudges and pulls you through the exhibition "[Blues for Smoke](#)" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, though the show's playlist is much more eclectic than any I ever knew. Smith and Holiday are here, along with classic Coltrane, Monk and Mingus. But so are Erykah Badu, Olivier Messiaen, Richard Pryor and Red Krayola.

As a musical category blues is hard to pin down, and this show makes the job harder, which seems to be its point.

It's saying: Blues isn't a thing; it's a set of feelings, a state of mind, maybe a state of grace. In origin it's African-American, developing with gospel and jazz, and folding into R&B, funk and hip-hop. But it has long since become a transethnic phenomenon bigger than music, an enveloping aesthetic that includes art.

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You get a sense of all this in the David Hammons installation "Chasing the Blue Train" that opens the show. Its parameters are set by a half-circle of six turned-on-their-sides baby grands. A pile of bluish coal sits on the floor; an electric toy train, tinted cobalt, tunnels through it and circles the room. Several recordings play — Coltrane, Monk, James Brown's "Night Train" — simultaneously, loud.

On an obvious level this is a playful homage to Coltrane's 1957 "Blue Train" album. But it's also an essay on the ceaseless, questing movement of blacks, often by night, through American history: on the underground railroad, on the freedom train, on the A train to Harlem. The installation had its debut at Exit Art in SoHo in 1989, but has been in Europe ever since. It's great to see it, and hear it, in New York again.

Europe — Paris — was the adopted home of the painter Beauford Delaney, who has a wonderful little 1968 portrait here of Charlie Parker, dressed like an African chief in a citrus-yellow robe. And in another welcome visit Renée Green's 1992-93 installation "Import/Export Funk Office" takes a cool look at 1960s African-American culture as viewed (distortedly) through European, and specifically German, eyes.

After that we're mostly on American turf, with one detour. In a big 1960 painting called "Garden of Music," Bob Thompson takes us to heaven, or Eden, where three nude musicians, each a different color — Coltrane (black), Ornette Coleman (brown), Sonny Rollins (blue) — jam away as the artist listens.

In this tenor-sax-serenaded version of "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe," the blues has no dark or complicated side, though we get a different story in other art. Rodney McMillian reminds us of the music's complex roots, sacred and profane, in the church and in the street, in a

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soft-sculpture chapel he designed for the show. It's righteously plain and neat, but made of tacky vinyl and colored hellfire red.

Despite a dimension of sizzle and sass, blues has always been a music of mourning. This is the message in the large painting by Kerry James Marshall, "[Souvenir IV](#)," from 1998. Done mostly in low-volume white and gray, it depicts a middle-class living room with a black, grandmotherly figure on a couch. The setting is ordinary, but nothing else is. The woman has wings, and the ghosts of dead singers — Dinah Washington, Wes Montgomery, Nat King Cole — float overhead like seraphim.

Seen in the same gallery as Mr. Marshall's tour-de-force picture a shelf-size installation by Zoe Leonard barely registers at first, though it's just as moving. It's an excerpt or spinoff from a 1994 project called "Strange Fruit" that Ms. Leonard worked on when AIDS was raging in New York, homophobia was sparking culture wars and friends were dying.

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*"Blues for Smoke" runs through April 28 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, [whitney.org](#).*

A version of this review appeared in print on February 8, 2013, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Mood Indigo: A Playlist For the Mind.

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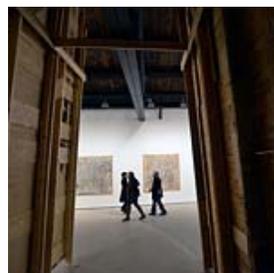
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With a title that refers both to homosexuality and to an anti-lynching song that Holiday made famous, Ms. Leonard's project was a kind of healing meditation, simple and direct. Week after week she saved the peeled skins of the daily fruit she ate — bananas and oranges — and, one by one, carefully sewed the torn skins back together, symbolically, at least, restoring the fruit to some kind of wholeness.

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Ms. Leonard, an artist with a faultless sense of expressive pitch, is white and gay. The show, while predominantly of work by African-American artists, has several other whites, as well as gay artists of various ethnicities. Mixes like this tend to get people bean counting, but that's beside the point here. The curators — Bennett Simpson of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and Chrissie Iles at the Whitney, with the artist Glenn Ligon as a consultant — have made even the most unlikely choices (Martin Kippenberger) for well-argued reasons. This case-by-case way of assembling a show can backfire and produce an unglued mess. Or it can create an interesting texture, even when the bulk of the work is familiar, as it is here.

Sexual difference and gender fluidity are significant components in the exhibition's view of the blues as an outsider phenomenon, a cultural space cleared for experimentation — aesthetic, emotional, philosophical. The approach is a smart one.

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Among other things, it turns what could have been a “racial” show in other directions, opening it up.

It brings into the picture, for example, born mavericks like Mark Morrisroe, who lived wild and died young of AIDS.

His surviving body of intensely autobiographical photography is pure theater, the equivalent of one long, madly inventive, impossibly virtuosic, elegiac aria that ended only when the singer finally ran out of breath.

The broad-spectrum take on blues also leaves room for hard-to-slot projects like Jeff Preiss’s “Stop, 1995-2012.”

This four-channel video installation is made up of hours of rapid-fire clips from what look like home movies Mr. Preiss has shot over the past 17 years. Initially “Stop” looks chaotic, the equivalent of a sourceless instrumental riff that just keeps going. Yet threads of logic come through. Among the early flashes of family pictures are a young red-haired girl, Mr. Preiss’s daughter. As the film goes on you see her grow, change appearance, change manner, until, at the end, she’s changing gender.

At least that’s what you think you see through the static of the editing, just as you think you see, and gradually do see, a trio of jazz musicians emerging from the allover psychedelic patterns of Jeff Donaldson’s vibrant, blue-dominant 1988 painting “Jampact/Jellitite (For Jamila).”

This picture comes closer than anything else here to looking the way music sounds. You might go straight from it to the nearby video viewing room to watch and hear performers in action, from the blues master Lightnin’ Hopkins, to the comedian Richard Pryor, to the extraordinary free-jazz performer-composer-artist Jaki Byard, from whom the show borrows its title. And you won’t want to miss the exhilarating, exhausting 1992 film by Stan Douglas, “Hors-champs,” in the Whitney’s lobby gallery.

It’s a studio recording, filmed in Paris, of four musicians — by the looks of it, three black, one white — improvising on Albert Ayler’s 1965 free-jazz composition, “Spirits Rejoice.” One by one, and together, they pry the piece apart, pump it up, empty it out, add vinegar to its gospel riffs, make its mocking quotation of the French national anthem sound positively sardonic, all the while detonating explosions of fioritura. The music they make is violent, adamant, enthralling; unmistakably political; almost embarrassingly expressive; for fleeting instants, sweet; and from start to finish go for broke, which is where blues goes every time.

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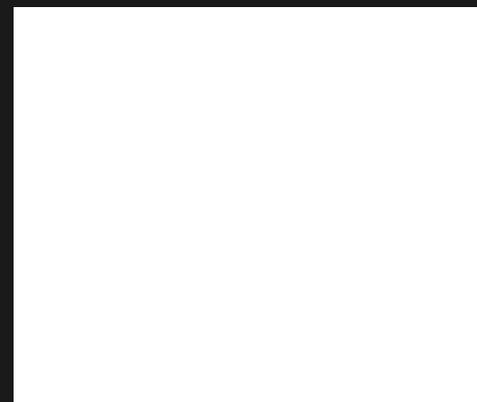
"Portrait of Charlie Parker" (1968), by Beauford Delaney, shows Parker dressed as an African chief.

*An earlier version of this slide included an incorrect credit. The credit should have read Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York; not Karsten Moran for The New York Times.*

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