

FRED WILSON: AFRO KISMET
16 March - 27 April 2019

Public opening: Saturday, March 16, 11am-6pm

The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.
- James Baldwin.

Fred Wilson's *Afro Kismet* lays bare questions of visibility: where are Africans in historical accounts of early Europe? How have the narratives institutionalized by museums erased the presence of black individuals of the past and present?

Over seven trips to Istanbul, Fred Wilson researched these questions, continuing the project he started in *Re: Claiming Egypt* and *Speak of Me as I Am*, his shows at the 1992 Cairo Biennale and 2003 Venice Biennale. In those works, Wilson revealed the history of black people living in each respective region - histories made obsolete in the Western collective imagination. He continues to interrogate the peripheral treatment of such histories in *Afro Kismet*, this time mining the history of Istanbul.

Wilson remarks how Baldwin, like himself, was his "creative self" in Istanbul. From 1961 to 1971, Baldwin lived in and around Istanbul, directing theatre and completing his novel, *Another Country*, which Wilson quotes in *Afro Kismet*. Though the work Baldwin produced in Istanbul does not directly point to African histories in Turkey, it rings of the same sentiments that Wilson describes as "aleness or loneliness" (Fred Wilson, 2018). These are the sentiments that Wilson centers when he isolates black figures in etchings thrifted from Istanbul's antique stores.

Afro Kismet centers representations of Afro Turks and celebrates them as part of a broader diasporic community. The most striking example is the show's two enormous *Iznik* tile walls printed with "Mother Africa" and "Black Is Beautiful" in Arabic lettering. These walls draw connections between the concealed Ottoman histories of enslaved Africans, their descendants in Istanbul today, and the cultural movements of black Americans in the 1970s. Wilson reminds us that today's Afro Turk presence in Istanbul is a legacy of slavery. The connection to America's history of slavery (and the institutional racism it has left behind) is apparent in *Trade Winds*, a black globe that visualizes the worldwide trade of humans.

Maccarone's additional work by Wilson invites viewers to reflect further. His black Murano glass mirrors and signature blown glass drips offer reflective surfaces, but their darkness denies the viewer a fully legible facsimile. In this way, the works question notions of objective representation and truth-presenting - the questions Wilson has been raising since his watershed 1992 installation *Mining the Museum*. The artist's flags of African countries contribute to this

deconstructive project: he drains color from them, leaving viewers to ponder the reductive process of signifying an arbitrarily sanctioned territory through stripes and shapes.

The show's glass works gesture back to Wilson's research for *Speak of Me as I Am*, which revealed an inherent connection between the African histories of Venice and Turkey. For the Venice Biennale, Wilson used *Othello* as a vehicle to convey the histories he sought to illuminate: naming his Murano chandeliers and mirrors after the play's lines and scenes. The works embody "things that are as complex as Othello himself. Most are a meditation on death, on blackness, on beauty" (Wilson, 2018). They encapsulate the aloneness or loneliness that reappear in *Afro Kismet*.

Fred Wilson (b. 1954, Bronx, New York) had his first groundbreaking and historically significant exhibition, *Mining the Museum* (1992), at the Maryland Historical Society. Since then he has had several solo exhibitions, including his retrospective *Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, which was organized by the Center for Art and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, and traveled to Saratoga Springs, Chicago, Berkeley, Houston, Andover, and Santa Monica, before closing at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Other solo presentations include *So Much Trouble in the World—Believe It or Not!* at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire (2005); *Works 2001-2011* at the Cleveland Museum of Art (2012); *Local Color* at The Studio Museum in Harlem (2013); *Black to the Powers of Ten* and *Wildfire Test Pit* at Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio (2016).

In 2003, Wilson represented the United States at the 50th Venice Biennale with the solo exhibition *Speak of Me as I Am*. His many accolades include the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's "Genius" Grant (1999). Wilson also sits on the boards of American Academy in Rome and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Wilson's work is included in several museum collections including Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio; Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, University of California; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Denver Art Museum, Colorado; Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, North Carolina; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California; Seattle Art Museum, Washington; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Tate, London; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

This exhibition is presented in kind collaboration with Pace Gallery, New York.