

# ARTFORUM

by Catherine Taft  
September 2018

## Todd Gray

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Writing in these pages in 2013, critic Bruce Hainley asked, “Aren’t the ‘life,’ ‘body,’ and ‘face’ of Michael Jackson in the running for some of the most abstract events of the last century?” Indeed, in his lifetime, Jackson complicated notions around his own race, gender, and cultural identity, and his transformation (what

Hainley pointed to as “transgendering”) took place before a critical public eye. Todd Gray was Jackson’s exclusive personal photographer in the late 1970s and early 1980s—and thus enjoyed a proximity that allowed him a privileged view of the celebrity in construction—and many of his original photographs from that period appear in his ongoing “Exquisite Terribleness” series, 2013–. In these works, Jackson is an elusive figure, obscured by and layered with more recent photos taken by the artist (landscapes,

portraits, and interior scenes, many shot in Africa). He appears variously as the silhouette of his curls, the studs of his red leather jacket, his hand extended as he dances, but never as a full, unobstructed body. Here, Jackson is an event that haunts the artist: a mirror, a surface, a supernatural being.

The eight collage-like photographic works included in “Portraits” continue Gray’s looking at Jackson while picturing the African diaspora in relation to selfhood and place. These composite images include glimpses of the famous musician, a crowd at one of his early concerts, natural vistas shot in South Africa, obscured portraits of colleagues taken during Gray’s stay at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center in Italy, the manicured gardens of the residency’s estate, and other fragmented scenes. The works seem magical or transmutational: Trees reflected on the water and turned vertically become a torso in *Maya Venus* (all works 2018). Images of stars taken by the Hubble

telescope seem a likely stand-in for a face (Jackson’s?) in *Akwidaa: Phase Patterns, Unit Structures*. The individual photos serve as deliberate pauses or movements in multipart, montage-like wholes. Their combinations are not digital but physical, consisting of individually framed components hung on top of, beside, or intersecting with one another. *Double Positive*, for example, is comprised of three framed pictures, the largest of which is a black-and-white image of Jackson and an anonymous man posed in a restaurant among a group of people; overlaid on top of this are two oval images shot in color: A tangle of roots or branches sits alongside Jackson, and the top of a palm tree flanks the other man. In *Purnima*, a portrait of the titular woman, *Purnima Mane*—an Indian-born expert on reproductive health, a former United Nations diplomat, and a fellow Bellagio resident—is obscured (save for her floral, emerald dress) by a tondo-like close-up of an Italian tapestry. These two images are composed atop yet another photo of dense flora shot in South Africa. The tripling of the plant motif—from actual branches to floral-print dress to the palms woven in an antique tapestry—creates a telescoping picture of the movement of people and goods. The work seems simultaneously located in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Gray’s frames are significant, not only because they serve as portals from one image to the next, but also because they are found objects sourced from thrift stores in South Los Angeles and South Africa. Many are of the decorative type made for family portraits, and may have hung in living rooms near the secondhand shops. Through their repurposing, Gray proposes other points of reference: the black American and South African everyday. The frame serves still another purpose: It concretely delimits or fractures each image, forcing literal connections while suggesting potential intrusions, confusions, and transformations. As dense as Gray’s references may be, his pictures are simple in their story-telling. A pop star gets abstracted into a folkloric hero, portals open up onto ancestral homes, and time is collapsed to reveal the postcolonial shifting of power.



Todd Gray, *Purnima*, 2018, ink-jet prints, found frames, UV laminate, 55 × 48 × 3 1/2". From the series "Exquisite Terribleness," 2013–.