

# NOAH DAVIS AND HIS UNDERGROUND MUSEUM LIGHT UP THE LOWER EAST SIDE

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Henry Taylor's *Black Boy Pissin' in a White Man's Mouth*

*courtesy of Foundation University Gallery*

"From the moment that life cannot be one continual orgasm, real happiness is impossible and pleasant surprise is promoted to the front rank of the emotions." I invoke the impenetrable poet John Ashbery to highlight the genuine power actual surprise still holds for many art lovers. For some, encountering something unexpected inside a museum or art gallery very much belongs in the first row of aesthetic feeling. For an art critic, it's like being blasted off on a Champagne cork.

If you walk into the basement space of a nondescript three-story residential building at 431 East 6th Street on Saturday, April 25, you'll feel like you're wading through jeroboams of bubbly. The display, "Noah Davis and the Underground Museum," serves not just as an introduction to a gifted artist, but to an entire art scene. On view at the brand-new Foundation University Gallery (FUG), the exhibition prominently features photo, video, painting, sculpture, and scads of artist-driven enterprise. It also paints a fulsome portrait of two innovative models of artistic collaboration.

The space was launched by the art collective Bruce High Quality Foundation; only a few blocks away is the Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU), a tuition- and degree-free nonprofit. A noncommercial NYC space with a challenging program -- upcoming shows include Betty Tompkins's explicit canvases and Eighties political provocateurs the Guerrilla Girls -- the Bruce's newest venture ups the ante on its demand for radical pedagogical renewal. (The group has called for the dissolution of MFA programs.) Davis himself is a remarkable painter and founder of the Underground Museum, a similarly associative venture he established three years ago in a disadvantaged area of Los Angeles. Together these two experiments represent an artist-led rebellion against the market and its professional classes -- collectors, dealers, curators, academics (and, yes, critics) -- that is best summarized by a Bruce maxim: "An art world built solely to feed the industry isn't an interesting place to live."

The Underground Museum has boldly charted L.A.'s final frontier: the heart of the inner city where no arts institution has gone before. Honored this month with a LAXART grant for its contributions to the community, the institution has journeyed east bearing various pieces from its collection. The selection features artworks that are by turns both revealingly luminous and quietly disturbing.

Chief among the unease-provoking contingent is Karon Davis's *Goat*, a video of a group of black men and boys slaughtering a goat in what looks to be Dixie backcountry. Accompanied by a voiceover that recalls an episode of *Wild Kingdom*, the prelude to a family barbecue morphs into ritual savagery. *Exfoliation*, a photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris, similarly scours the rich ambiguities of black representation. An image of a young black man removing makeup in a public bathroom, it appears to memorialize the aftermath of a drag performance -- and turn a white bystander, also pictured, into a total square. Firmly in the radiant camp are two small paintings by Henry Taylor. Both canvases feature bold, flat colors and an on-the-street conceit that would be prosaic were the imagery less outrageous. As it is, *Black Boy Pissin' in a White Man's Mouth* channels a good deal of post-Ferguson animosity.

Most luminous, though, are Davis's own contributions: four paintings, twenty collages, and one found sculpture that constitute the artist's first solo New York outing. The subject matter -- African-American characters and surrealist narratives framed by spatial dissonances and cool colors -- and a moody, pared-down style that simultaneously invokes *Shaft* and Neo Rauch, offer a glimpse into what the 32-year-old painter has called "instances where black aesthetics and modernist aesthetics collide." As weirdly affecting as washed-out photographs, canvases like *Bishops* and *Carlos' World* are not merely enigmatic; they suggest unacknowledged possibilities for American painting.

You'll be hearing a lot about \$400 million museums next week thanks to the opening of the new Whitney. But you won't see anything nearly as surprising or as radical as Noah Davis and his Underground Museum.

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