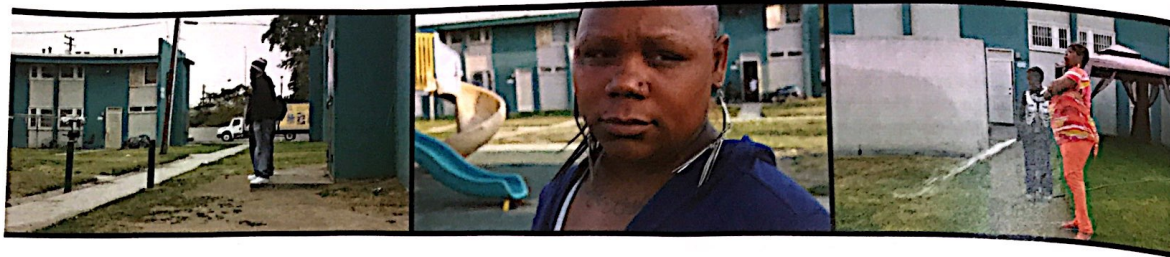


Art in America

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By David Markus



Dana Lixenberg:
Imperial Courts,
2015, three-channel
video, 69 minutes;
at GRIMM.

of Sephardic descent—set him apart from the largely Ashkenazi immigrant artists of Montparnasse. From cabaret performers to beggars and prostitutes, it was to society's more marginal figures that the artist gravitated, and they appear in several of his drawings.

Rather than his famously ill health, it was Paris's anti-Semitism that Modigliani's daughter claimed weighed most heavily on her father, and the exhibition contextualized such issues by displaying racist caricatures of Jews that appeared on the covers of the anti-Semitic newspaper *La Libre Parole*. Evidently, the artist routinely introduced himself with the statement "My name is Modigliani, and I am a Jew." Indeed, his 1910 *Self-Portrait with Beard*, in which he depicted himself with Near Eastern features and wearing an exotic-looking tunic, suggests an individual vaunting his Jewishness rather than keeping it under wraps. In the portrait *The Jewess* (1908), he portrayed society wife Maud Abrantes with a prodigious nose, which the exhibition identified as a projection of his own Jewishness. Yet the artist's self-portrait as Pierrot (ca. 1911), like his sculpted limestone head from the same year shown in an adjoining room, reveal a decidedly straight and streamlined nose, recalling that of the Ntumu mask on display nearby. While Modigliani fixated on non-Western identities, his assimilation of them suggests anything but a straightforward meditation on Jewishness.

Russian poet Anna Akhmatova visited Modigliani twice in Paris, and a suite of several portraits of her offers a case study of his approach to drawing: by turns unrehearsed and meticulous. His studies of anonymous models likewise convey his contrasting approaches: if *Female Nude Reclining on Left Side, Right Arm in Front of Her Body* (ca. 1909) appears almost gestural in its seeming informality and spontaneity, *Female Nude with Winglike Arms* (ca. 1910) demonstrates a hieratic, even decorative, economy of line. That hieraticism derived in great part from the artist's interest in Egyptian art, which, along with the symmetry of Cycladic figurines and various other traditions, also informs his series of Caryatid drawings, gouaches, and sculptures. The exhibition's final gallery included examples of what were ostensibly inspirations for his Caryatid series: from a Cycladic marble figure to a Bodhisattva from pre-Angkor Western Cambodia, from a Syrian sculpture of a seated God to a Thai Buddha.

The accompanying wall text averred that the Eastern inflections of Modigliani's Caryatids evince a certain "audacity in defining himself as different." Yet the metaphorical otherness of the artist's representations appears repeatedly assimilated to a fundamentally Western idiom, one only intermittently definable as Jewish per se. Modigliani's synthesis of historical aesthetic sources and modernist forms remains far more compelling and nuanced than any articulation of identity politics.

—Ara H. Merjian

DANA LIXENBERG GRIMM

Although Dutch photographer Dana Lixenberg has had an extensive career photographing entertainment icons for magazines, another side of her practice has taken place far from the limelight. In 2005, for instance, she created a series of photographs of the homeless population of Jeffersonville, Indiana; a few years later, she photographed an Innupiaq community in Alaska whose existence has been threatened by global warming. "Imperial Courts, 1993–2015," which Lixenberg began in the aftermath of the 1992 Rodney King riots, centers on the inhabitants of a housing project in Watts, Los Angeles. The body of work includes 393 photographs (which were recently awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize), audio recordings, a web documentary, and a roughly hour-long three-channel video installation. Like her previous works, "Imperial Courts" provokes reflection on a question posed by Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa in a recent essay about Lixenberg and others who document lives unfamiliar to their own: "What are the virtues of a photographer's position on the outside of a world looking in?"

It is a question that Lixenberg herself appears to pose repeatedly throughout the video, *Imperial Courts* (2015)—the centerpiece of her exhibition at GRIMM, which also included a tiny sampling of the black-and-white prints. The video, shot in color, was filmed in the courtyard of the housing project. For the opening sequence, the center screen shows a series of tables set up outside a segment of the two-story cinderblock complex; the right features a group of girls in prom dresses waiting for friends to exit one of the building's iron-barred doors; and the left bears a close-up of several goldfish in a fishbowl on one of the tables. An uncomfortable analogy presents itself here between the fish in the glass bowl and the filmed inhabitants of *Imperial Courts*, whose lives are presented as almost totally circumscribed by the housing project's boundaries.

But Lixenberg, a white European who spent two decades getting to know the predominantly African American community, seems cognizant of the anthropological pitfalls of her undertaking. Forestalling false notions about the knowability of her subject matter, she generally inhabits a spatial and psychological middle distance from those she's filming. Throughout much of the video, people go about their business, seemingly indifferent to the camera, though their occasional eye contact with us shows that they are often well aware of its presence. We see men smoking together or playing dice. One woman braids another's hair as a friend looks on. A boy bounces a basketball along the courtyard path. Families enjoy a Fourth of July barbecue in front of their

apartments. Though we catch snippets of conversation, often we hear little more than the sound of the freeway that borders the property. Not once in the course of the video does the camera enter anyone's home.

A sense of intimacy is established, instead, through a series of portrait vignettes, in which individual subjects are filmed at close range, speaking to the camera, or reciting something they've written. What we hear in these instances are stories of hardship and perseverance. "At only twenty-two, I done seen it all, I done done it all, been through the worst news," raps a young woman. One man, after explaining that the scars on his face are from a car accident that left him initially pronounced dead, sings a joyful anthem titled "Still Breathing." Another recites a poem he wrote while incarcerated. "Pain is transparent but it's never unseen," he remarks at one point. The line would make a fitting epigraph for the video, in which traces of pain are apparent not only on the faces we see but in the small memorials of candles and plastic flowers and bandanas on which the camera lingers at times.

Still, one is reminded of how much about the lives before us remains inaccessible. The video closes with a wide shot of a group of boys, their backs to the camera, their words indecipherable. The last sound we hear is the sudden slam of one of the housing project's doors, behind which lie worlds unseen.

—David Markus