



TROPICAL FANTASIES, DARK HISTORIES

Nari Ward, Jamaica-born and Harlem-based, creates sculptural objects and installations that address racial inequities with humor, poignancy, and formal inventiveness.

by Kirsten Swenson

CALYPSO MUSIC, evoking carefree rum- and sun-soaked pleasures, and colorful hanging bottles of Tropical Fantasy soda lured passersby under the glowing yellow awning of the Happy Smilers bodega. This was the entryway to the first installation encountered by visitors to Nari Ward's retrospective, "Sun Splashed," at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, the touring show's last stop. Once inside *The Happy Smilers: Duty Free Shopping* (1996), one strolled along a wall of broken air conditioners, fans, and refrigerators wrapped with old firehoses. Providing a forlorn and absurd beach access, a rusty fire escape descended from the ceiling to a rectangular plot of pristine white sand and salt. The fire escape was found in Ward's Harlem neighborhood, along with the curb-picked appliances. The gallery walls were sunny yellow. An altarlike Astroturf-covered platform held speakers that emitted the patter of rain hitting a tin roof, a sound that Ward associates with his childhood in Jamaica.¹ Fire and water are the elemental poles of Ward's work: life-giving and destructive, recurring in paradise and poverty.

The Happy Smilers debuted two decades ago at Deitch Projects in downtown Manhattan, the work's only appearance prior to "Sun Splashed." The use of a bodega awning to mask an art gallery was a subterfuge, inspired by a store on Ward's block that was the front for a numbers operation. (Institutional critique pervades Ward's art.) After sitting in storage, *The Happy Smilers* has reemerged in the age of Black Lives Matter, increasingly visible white supremacy, and an explicitly anti-immigrant national agenda. Ward's installation

View of Nari Ward's installation *Happy Smilers: Duty Free Shopping*, 1996, awning, plastic soda bottles, fire hose, fire escape, salt, household items, audio recording, speakers, and aloe vera plant, dimensions variable. Photo John Kennard.

All images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Works by Nari Ward in "Out of Sight! Art of the Senses," at Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Nov. 4, 2017–Feb. 4, 2018.

KIRSTEN SWENSON is an associate professor of art history at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. See Contributors page.



is a kind of time capsule, its everyday materials preserving obscure narratives of racial politics from the age before social media. For instance, Tropical Fantasy sodas: David Dinkins, New York's only black mayor, drank one on TV in 1991 to disprove a rumor that the beverage was made by the Ku Klux Klan and contained an ingredient to make black males sterile.² The bottles that festoon *The Happy Smilers*—found in “the corner stores of mostly low-income neighborhoods,” Ward notes—index the socioeconomic conditions of a specific (and still relevant) urban history.³

The Happy Smilers, Ward told me, was among several major installations in the 1990s that “laid the groundwork for a lot of years after that.” He was concerned with the question “who’s your community?” He wanted to make work for Harlem, installations that “mirrored the sense of crisis in the community” at a time when the neighborhood was devastated by crime, AIDS, and the crack epidemic. Ward designed his first iconic installation, *Amazing Grace*, in 1993 as an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The museum’s galleries were too small for his purposes, so Ward found a vacant firehouse on West 141st Street. An elliptical path made of flattened firehoses was lined with some three hundred baby strollers plucked from Harlem curbs. A tape of Mahalia Jackson’s gospel standard played: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me / I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind, but now I see.” Her voice embodies the bittersweet optimism of twentieth-century black experience: migration, resistance, freedom, survival. The strollers were arranged in the shape of a ship’s hull, in reference to the origin of the hymn, which was written by

John Newton, an eighteenth-century British slave trader, after his conversion to Christianity during a storm at sea. The space was ark-like and visitors circumambulated in ritual fashion. The Church of the Meek, where leaders like Al Sharpton came to address the black community, was next door and served as caretaker of the firehouse. PS 123, Mahalia Jackson School, was across the street. “Just around the corner, teen-agers sell crack,” the *New York Times* noted.⁴

Amazing Grace appeared again in New York in 2013—when I experienced the piece—at the New Museum’s project space on the Bowery as part of the exhibition “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star.” Like other Ward installations, it is a kind of multisensory theater—you feel springy firehose underfoot, smell old rubber and soiled strollers, hear the sound of gospel. The abandoned strollers were, by then, poignant artifacts of the Harlem of the early 1990s. Firehoses have been a recurring motif in Ward’s work. Although they might otherwise suggest rescue, they became an emblem of violent suppression after police turned them on peaceful protesters during the Civil Rights movement.

IN 1996, Janine Antoni, Marcel Odenbach, and Ward organized an exhibition of their own work called “Three-Legged Race.” Antoni restored a kitchen in a burnt-out building next door to the West 141st Street firehouse. In the old station itself, Odenbach installed two video projections, each showing boats on the Hudson River and gay men cruising on the Chelsea piers, intercut with shots of refugees arriving in the

Ward’s installations are a kind of multisensory theater—you feel springy firehose underfoot, smell old rubber and soiled strollers, hear the sound of gospel.

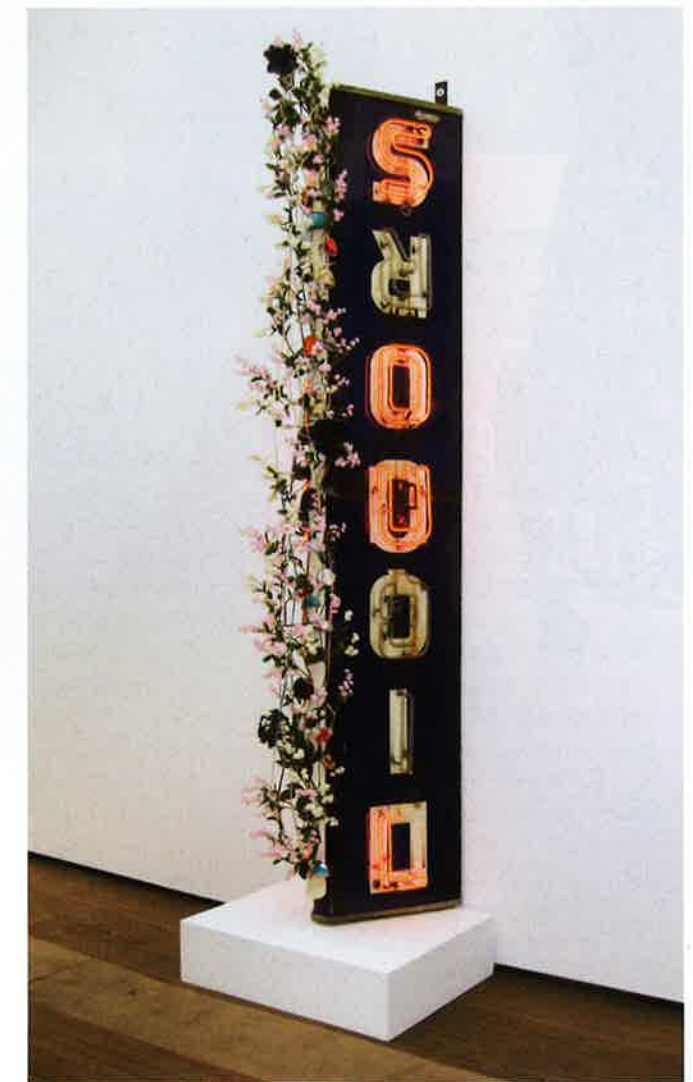
United States. Ward filled a floor with complex webs of rope, tubing, wire, and yarn, holding in suspension objects found on-site, including a crib, books, piano keys, and various tools. The installation, titled *Hunger Cradle*, was a spatial poem in response to the rich history and current distress of Harlem, “a world of beautiful architecture and crumbling infrastructure, a second city, where art rarely travels,” as Leslie Camhi wrote in the *Village Voice*.⁵ The 1993 Whitney Biennial had made identity politics museum fare, but the trio wanted to engage a broader public. They visited schools and put a sandwich board on the street where local residents hung out, Antoni recalled.⁶ For Ward, “accessibility to the everyday person that I wanted to talk to from the community” was—and is—paramount.

“Three-Legged Race” caught the attention of the dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who offered Ward his first gallery show. *The Happy Smilers* did not sell, but Deitch paid for storage. Ward recalls Deitch as a force in promoting artists who produce socially engaged work; he encouraged them to be ambitious and unconstrained, without concern for commerce. In the 1990s, daring shows by Vanessa Beecroft, Mariko Mori, Chen Zhen, and Ward enhanced the Deitch brand, even as the dealer’s business was concentrated in the secondary market. Deitch did, however, facilitate the purchase of *Amazing Grace* by the Greek collector Dakis Joannou. Although the piece was conceived as a site-specific response to Harlem, its sale to Joannou prompted Ward to begin “coming to terms with the choreographing of the community and the white cube.” The strollers left Harlem, and *Amazing Grace* was exhibited in Athens in 2004 and Vienna in 2007 before returning to the US in 2013.⁷

Writing in the catalogue for “Sun Splashed,” Naomi Beckwith, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, calls Ward’s practice “elsewhere oriented” and contends that “negotiating multiple worldspaces—inhabiting one space but gesturing toward another—is at the core of Ward’s installations and sculptures.”⁸ Indeed, in Ward’s work nomadic materials extracted from Harlem or his native Jamaica point to distant sites that are felt as absences. The Harlem streetscape made frequent appearances in “Sun Splashed” with works like *Beat Box* (2000), the casing of a New York City payphone fitted with drumheads and a fire extinguisher, or *Radha LiquorSoul* (2010), a neon liquor sign inverted, then festooned with artificial flowers, shoelaces, and severed tips of shoes. *AfroChase* (2010) utilizes a construction banner for Chase bank, inked jet black, letters excised, the voids filled with cowrie shells, felt, and Afro picks. By 2010, there was a new kind of flight from Harlem, as the historic African American population began to be “chased” out by gentrification.

Ward’s repurposed objects report on loss, while his meticulous repetitive processes, applied to materials that seem valueless, offer a kind of recuperation. Broiler pans panel the wall in *Iron Heavens* (1995), their white-speckled enamel surfaces suggesting constellations, while myriad charred baseball bats, each dotted

with patches of cotton, are propped at the base. The bats merge the national pastime with the violence of beatings and burnings, the cotton evoking the Old South. The resourcefulness of cooking, the abandonment of homes—both are suggested by the disused pans. For *Savior* (1996), Ward twisted and singed plastic shopping bags and wrought them into a diamond-patterned scaffolding that grows like a Gaudí construction out of a shopping cart. He then pushed the eleven-foot-tall cart-sculpture around Harlem. The awkward stroll is documented in a video, *Pushing Savior* (1996, shot by Marcel Odenbach), an aesthetic enactment of destitution akin to Krzysztof Wodiczko’s “Homeless Vehicle Project” (1988–89) or William Pope.L’s protracted crawl up Broadway (*The Great White Way*, 2001–09). Gasoline cans and a chandelier hang like baubles from another shopping cart statue, *Crusader* (2005). Ruin always seems at hand in Ward’s laborious



Radha LiquorSoul, 2010, metal and neon sign, PVC tube with artificial flowers, shoelaces, and shoe tips, 126 by 25 by 29 inches. Collection Rachel and Jean Pierre Lehmann.

Ward delayed his naturalization for seven years, ambivalent about citizenship. What does it mean to be an American?



constructions, as if they could collapse or go up in flames at any time. This is, of course, the precarity of poverty.

Ward took up residence in Harlem while attending the School of Visual Arts in the late 1980s and has never left. His thirty-year connection to the community came after a childhood of displacement. His family moved from Jamaica to Brownsville, Brooklyn, when he was twelve, and then to the white, middle-class community of Parsippany, New Jersey, a few years later, when his mother accepted a position caring for a disabled child. Uprootedness, with an attendant sensitivity to the immigrant experience, is a poignant motif in Ward's oeuvre, reflected most directly in *Naturalization Drawing Table*, a work first installed at Deitch Projects in 2004 and reinstalled as part of "Sun Splashed." A clear acrylic table bears affixed ads for Red Bull, Arizona Iced Tea, and other brands of sweet or alcoholic beverages. It appears to be cobbled from the bulletproof partitions used in convenience stores in rough neighborhoods. Pages from an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) application, marked up with Ward's doodles, are mounted around the table's perimeter. Visitors can complete a modified page of an INS form, which is notarized and further personalized with the viewer's photograph. Viewers are, in effect, processed and put on display—"naturalized." Ward himself delayed his naturalization for seven years, ambivalent about American citizenship.

What does it mean to become an American? In the 2004 show, alongside the *Naturalization Drawing Table*, Ward exhibited *Glory*, an operative tanning bed housed in split oil drums (the invasion of Iraq was under way). Ultraviolet rays passed through a stencil of the American flag, darkly conflating skin color and national identity, pointing to the role of "branding" as practiced, in American history and economics, by slave owners and corporations.

The title of Ward's retrospective was adapted from Reggae Sunsplash, the name of an annual music festival staged in Jamaica from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. Reggae Sunsplash is credited with the global popularization of reggae, and with bolstering Jamaica's status as a year-round tourist destination for Europeans and Americans in particular. The transcultural experience of tourism—voluntary, temporary displacement, marked by exotic fantasies and the pursuit of cultural clichés—is another dynamic reframed by Ward. "Sun Splashed" is also the title of Ward's 2013 series of large-scale photographs, a collaboration with photographer Lee Jaffe. The artist poses solemn-faced with potted tropical plants in various Italian homes (he was in residence at the American Academy in Rome) while wearing his Uncle Euton's pink shirt and straw hat (Euton's Jamaican mento band was the Happy Smilers). The pink shirt is always wet. Ward was "watered" with the plants. Like the houseplants, he is shown uprooted and out of place. He wears the water like sweat.

The artist David Hammons advised Ward in the 1990s, "Nari, they love to see you sweat."⁹ The 2011 video *Sweater* is a tightly framed shot of Ward's sweat-beaded cheek, jumpy from movements of the body. But the context for this sweating skin is left to the viewer to fill in. Here, and elsewhere, Ward mines the ambiguity of sweat on black skin: is it the sweat of labor, anxiety, athletics, sex, heat? Often, in Ward's work, bodies are implied by their absence, such as the body missing from the empty tanning



Nari Ward and Lee Jaffe: *Sun Splashed, Artin*, 2013, C-print, 83 3/8 by 63 inches. Courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana.

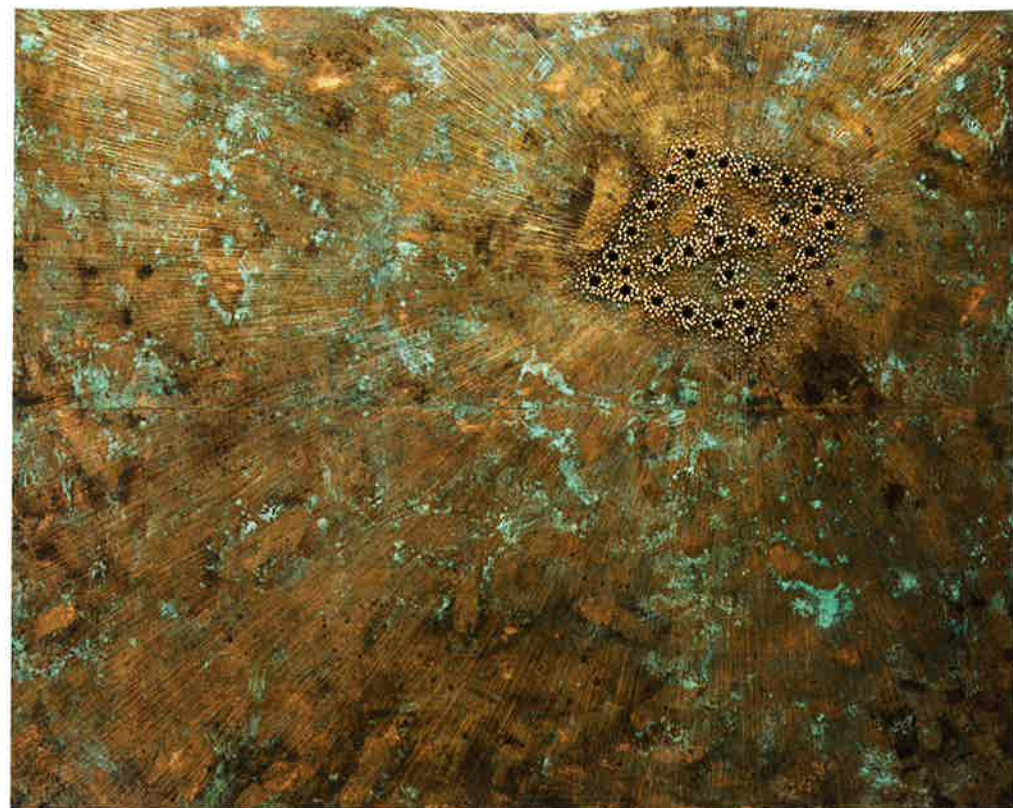
bed in *Glory*. Or the bodies of runaway slaves suggested by his "Breathing Panel" series (2015). Each wall-mounted copper sheet is perforated with a diamond-shaped configuration of airholes, a Congolese prayer symbol adapted by the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, a stop on the Underground Railroad, to ventilate a chamber hidden beneath the floor. Police violence victim Eric Garner's haunting 2014 cry, "I can't breathe," is also evoked by the panels. Etched lines radiate from the airholes, and footprints mar the luminous copper, traces of a body. The Breathing Panels are both formally exquisite and a symbol of racist brutality.

The anxiety of racism, poverty, and displacement pulsed through "TILL, LIT," Ward's solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin in New York this summer. The largest wall of the gallery, extending behind the front desk, was painted black as part of an installation titled *Hanging Study* (2017). Eleven canvases, each containing a letter from the word R-E-P-A-R-A-T-I-O-N-S, were placed on sawhorses and propped against the wall. The dark paintings have thin collaged borders made from the perimeters of dollar bills, removed by X-acto knife. Rectangles of craft paper the size of the canvases were mounted on the wall above each letter: blank inversions, or an alternative text as yet unknown.

In the next gallery, surveillance floodlights were positioned low and horizontally to illuminate the floor. The installation, *LIT*, summoned up the inhabitants of high-crime New York neighborhoods whose parks and street corners—and bedrooms—are harshly illuminated by floodlights in a policing tactic known as "omnipresence." The floodlights were accompanied by a gen-

Opposite, view of the exhibition "Nari Ward: Sun Splashed," 2017, showing (left to right) *Savior*, 1996; *Iron Heavens*, 1995; and *Crusader*, 2005, at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Photo John Kennard.

nted Right, 2015,
wood, copper
t, copper nails,
darkening patina,
y 120 inches.
ection Allison
Larry Berg.



erator's penetrating buzz. The anchoring element was a pyramid-shaped concrete block. The form recurred in the show, a reference to the pyramid on the dollar bill, capped by the all-seeing Eye of Providence. At the far side of the gallery, the gentle light of votive candles flickered clandestinely in the pyramid's shadow.

A series of paintings, "TILL" (2017), hung against pale dirty-green walls—the color of used money. The works are murky black and brown, inspired by Rothko's late paintings. These paintings too are collaged with dollar bill edges, and a cash register drawer is affixed at the center of each, its empty compartments facing the viewer. Stacks of bills and hands grasping money are left to the imagination. A portion of the sales of the "TILL" series will go to a nonprofit that supports homeless individuals with AIDS. The money-green walls extended into a final gallery with one gold and one silver painting (*Providence Spirits [Gold]* and *[Silver]*, 2017), radiant with powdered metals dissolved in white rum—luxuries that are inseparable from slavery and colonial suppression. Cowrie shells, a historic currency, formed a pyramid at the center. It was all about money.

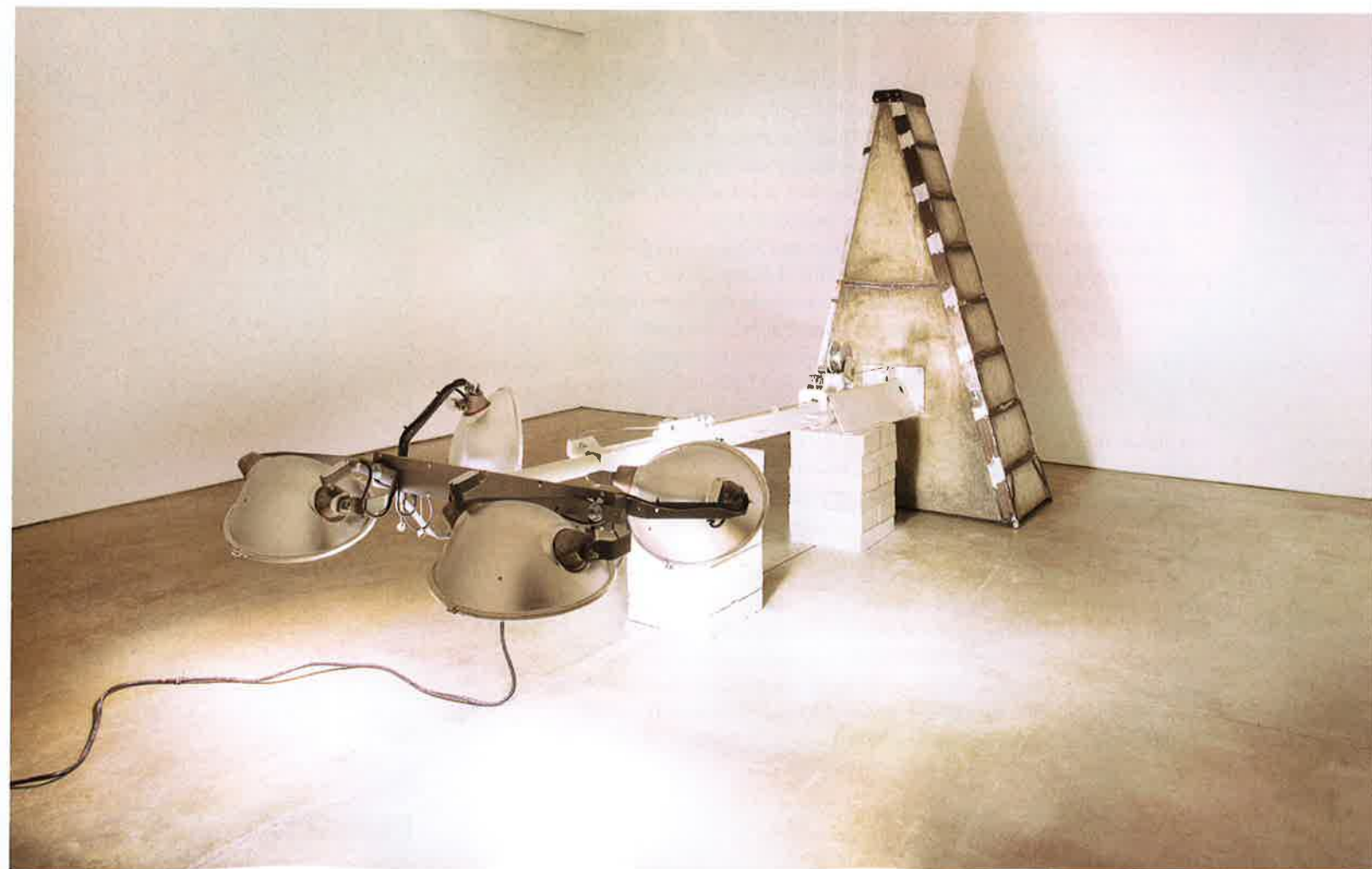
To really engage with the works shown in "TILL, LIT" is a serious moral task. Repressed histories and contemporary realities have always been Ward's subjects, even beneath the lilting sounds of calypso. As with other important artworks that confront injustice—I am thinking in particular of Mark Bradford's contribution to the 2017 Venice Biennale—devastating truths are interwoven with redemption, beauty, and humor. This makes for highly social and provocative work—teasing, seductive, and mesmerizing, even as our darkest collective realities dwell at its core.

Ward's recent activities around New York indicate his growing role as a public artist. His installation *We the People* (2011), which

spells out its title on a wall in dangling crowdsourced shoelaces, is on permanent view at the New-York Historical Society. "Nari Ward: G.O.A.T., again" (the acronym stands for Greatest of All Time, an honorific usually applied to athletes like LeBron James and Michael Jordan) recently populated Socrates Sculpture Park with concrete goats, and *Smart Tree*, a smart car on blocks sprouting foliage, is installed on the High Line. In its wry insistence on half-hidden social truths, Ward's now increasingly visible work prompts optimism at a troubled moment in American history. ○

"Nari Ward: Sun Splashed" was organized by associate curator Diana Nawi for the Pérez Art Museum Miami, where it appeared Nov. 19, 2015–Feb. 21, 2016. The show traveled to the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, June 24–Aug. 22, 2016, and the ICA Boston, Apr. 26–Sept. 4, 2017. "Nari Ward: G.O.A.T., again" was on view at Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, Apr. 29–Sept. 4. "Nari Ward: TILL, LIT" was at Lehmann Maupin, New York, June 2–Aug. 25.

1. Nari Ward, telephone conversation with the author, June 21, 2017. Unless otherwise noted, all remarks by Ward, including direct quotes, are from this conversation.
2. Arlene Levinson, "Rumor Almost Ruins Small Soda Firm," *latimes.com*, July 14, 1991.
3. See the interview "Nari Ward by Lee Jaffe," *bombmagazine.org*, fall 2015.
4. Nina Reyes, "Finding Beauty in Babyless Strollers," *nytimes.com*, Dec. 12, 1993.
5. Leslie Camhi, "Other Rooms," *Village Voice*, Oct. 15, 1996, p. 83.
6. Janine Antoni and Marcel Odenbach, "Advertisement for Myself," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 21, No. 2, May, 1999, pp. 36–37.
7. The piece appeared in two Dakis Joannou Collection shows: "Monument to Now," Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, June 22, 2004–Dec. 31, 2005, and "Dream & Trauma," Kunsthalle Wien and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, June 29–Oct. 4, 2007.
8. Naomi Beckwith, "Elsewhere Oriented," in Diana Nawi, ed., *Nari Ward: Sun Splashed*, New York, DelMonico Books, 2015, p. 59.
9. David Hammons quoted in "In Conversation: Nari Ward with Phong Bui," *brooklynrail.com*, May 3, 2012.



site top,
ing Study,
U.S. currency
, acrylic
indelible ink,
roof white rum
ood panels,
en saw horses,
raft paper,
els, 24 by 18
nches each.
Matthew
mann.

site bottom,
2017,
ete, ladder,
illance lights,
nized wash
s, and candles,
visions variable.
Matthew
mann.