

A SYMBOL MESSED WITH: MICHI MEKO'S LIKE A WEIRD SWEET SPOT

BALANCE

For the past few months Atlanta-based artist Michi Meko has been posting a variety of images on his Instagram feed captioning each with the title of his Westobou Gallery exhibition: *Like a Weird Sweet Spot*. It's as if images rather than words might better describe the phenomena of such a place. Take for example, a picture posted on September 2nd of a leaf branch hanging ever so precariously from a spider web. Or another photo, this one posted on August 24th of a drawing from presumably Meko's sketchbook depicting an abstracted water buoy illustrated in delicate green pencil. On August 16th, a still from the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the young protagonist sitting on a makeshift boat, the tail end of a truck, fishing net nearby. Or one of my personal favorites, a series of 10 images of Serena Williams on the court posted on July 19th conjuring both that satisfying pop of the tennis ball as it hits the tensile web of the racket and Williams's black excellence. A kind of sweet spot that Claudia Rankine describes as grace: "Serena's grace comes because she won't be forced into stillness; she won't accept those racist projections onto her body without speaking back; she won't go gently into the white light of victory."

Serena Williams is out there on the court by herself blazing a hot trail, powerful and victorious despite blatant racism and sexism throughout her career. And Meko in his posts often references in addition to "Tension. Balance. Buoyancy." the sense of being out alone on some sort of quest, searching. "Just out here by myself..." he writes in one caption. Meko's work reflects his interest in navigation in both literal movement and in the figurative sense of how to negotiate a world that doesn't easily accommodate black bodies. I spoke with him about the exhibition on the phone in early September. Fittingly, he was driving alone to the beach to fish, hoping, he said, to get out of his head and away from the world. With the whirr of the car on the road in the background, he worked through his ideas surrounding this weird sweet spot.

TENSION

"I was thinking about black males, myself as a black male, and the idea of always being aware of losing but also always trying to win." Meko is talking about his piece *Always Aware of Losing: Miles Beneath the Slick Dressing*, a work that reference both a flag and a hobo stick. A black plastic bag hangs off a branch that juts off from the wall. Inside the bag an empty Colt 45 and lottery tickets. In a 1986 interview the seminal artist David Hammons remarked to the art historian Kellie Jones, "Outrageously magical things happen when you mess around with a symbol." Here, Meko proves that directly with these potent emblems of gain and loss.

"I was looking at these dudes who hang out at the corner store, the constant gamble," Meko tells me. "The winning and the losing. Right now, driving down this country road as a black man is a gamble. Who knows what could happen if I was pulled over by the cops?" As in all of Meko's work, this piece is both personal and political. Across from *Always Aware of Losing* is the found photo *One Last Smile Before the Undertow*. Obama's official Presidential portrait; he stands in front of the flag and stares directly at the viewer exuding strength and empathy. The image was everywhere for eight years and Meko couldn't ignore it as it was hung proudly in barber shops, black owned business, and homes across the South. A potent sign of hope that a black man can win, that he can be president. Two years later, in this current administration, Obama's Presidency can seem like some kind of aberrant anachronism, a dream deferred. Or simply a symbol messed with.

BUOYANCY

In the center of the Gallery is a kind of anchor to the show, a large elegant work made from old water buoys painted black and hanging off a tall structure. On the bottom of the sculpture titled *Parallax: Are You... Can You... Were You... Are We... Can We... Were We... The Answers to the Most Proverbial Questions*, folds of weed blocker garden fabric undulate out into the gallery space. Balanced on top is an old tree stump turned upside down. Like an updated Winged Victory of Samothrace, the sculpture holds the room, revealing Meko's sensitivity to material choices. "I like to take simple materials out of their original context and apply sensual, even feminine qualities to them," he says. In combining mundane objects, Meko creates mystical revelations while imbuing power in things personal to him—direct representations of movement and growth.

In the past year Meko has been taking inventory, looking at where his career has been and where it will lead. "I'm in this weird sweet spot," he explains. "I've won awards, but I feel in-between. A kind of growing pain, this new pressure to perform and produce." Scanning out, he becomes reflective, this weird sweet spot might be about his own life but it is also about the lives of every black man in America. He references "double consciousness", W.E.B. Dubois' term coined in 1903 to describe the sensation of a divided identity living as black and American. "Another layer to the work," Meko explains, "is black people and their positioning in America, me trying to get rid of my double consciousness."

"Black buoyancy" is a phrase Meko uses to describe the resilience of black America. He demonstrates it through his powerful works filled with potent symbolism. Another piece in the show, *The Distance Between Us: I Have No Float, On Repaired Line. Uni Knotted.*, is a collection of cast iron skilletts painted in gold and black glitter carefully balanced on stretched fishing line. "The line has been severed and re-tied," Meko explains. The knotting creates new tension, new buoyancy. "With tension there is possibility." And with that the phone line goes dead. Michi Meko has driven too far off for a signal. He's out there now.

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