

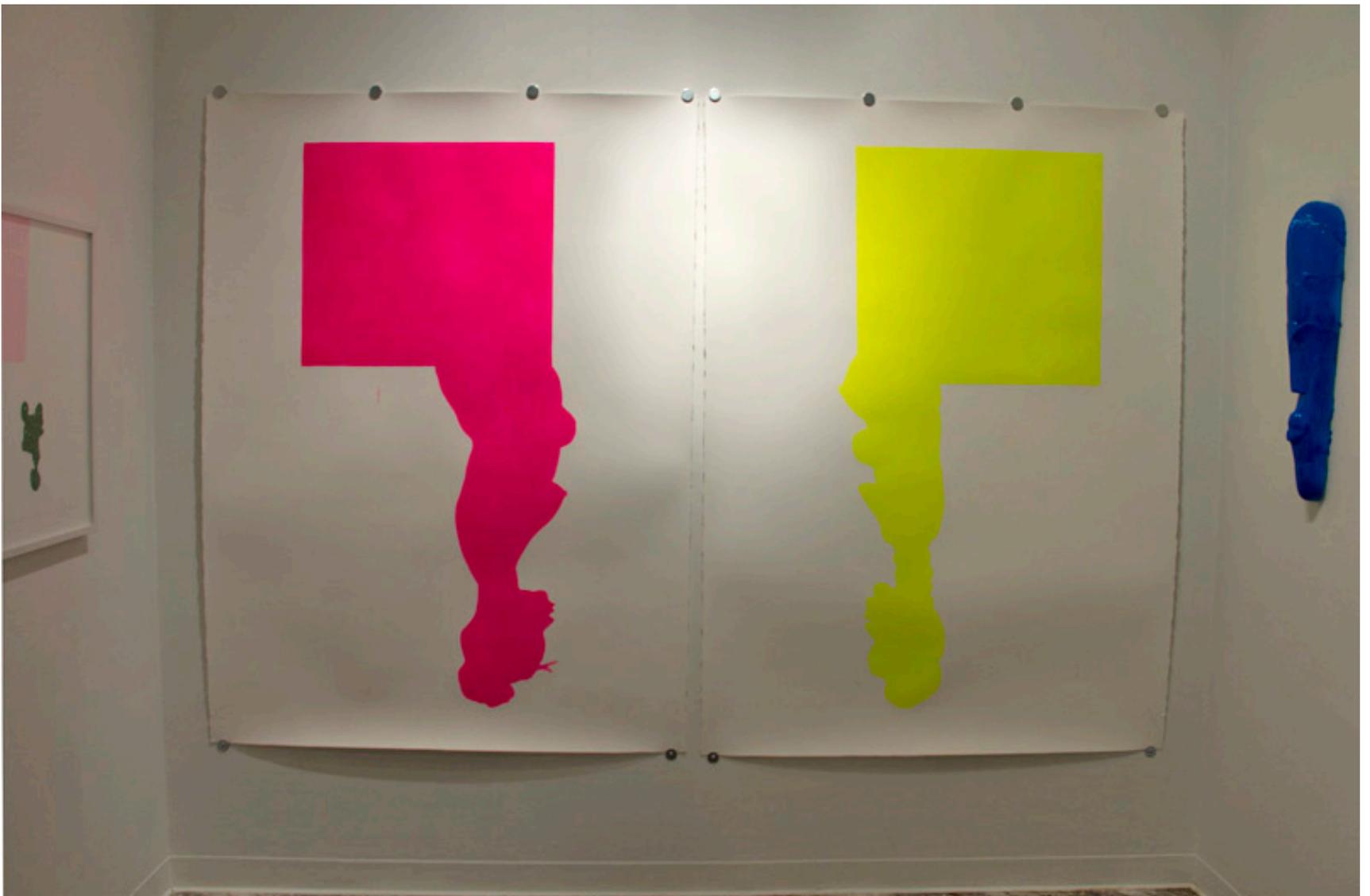
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Zoë Charlton: *Luster*,

An Essay by Victoria Sunnergren

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Zoë Charlton's exhibit, *Luster* was developed while in residence at the McColl Center for Art + Innovation and was first exhibited at Grizzly Grizzly in January, 2018. Inspired by the African masks she uses in her large-scale drawings and collages, Charlton expands her intersecting interests in cultural identity, race, commodity and cultural tokenism, with a critical yet humorous approach to her subject: collectable African statues and African masks. Victoria Sunnergren's essay on *Luster* was written in conjunction with its exhibition at the University of Delaware in October, 2018.







Luster is a fitting name for a new selection of works by Zoë Charlton on view in the Recitation Hall Gallery at the University of Delaware in October of 2018. The exhibition, Charlton's first solo show in the state of Delaware, consists of silhouettes in bright neon colors and glitter juxtaposed against stark white backgrounds as well as African-inspired masks thickly painted in primary colors. Her artworks alternatively shine with glitter coats or glisten with the sheen of acrylic paint. In these works, bright colors and attractive textures lure viewers in to a conversation about race, gender, and cultural tokenism in today's art market and collecting culture.

Charlton uses multiple methods of obfuscation in these works to force viewers to linger over each image, searching for meaning. She covers images in bright colors, obscuring their details and rendering them into silhouettes. She also manipulates their shapes, adding boxes to cover portions of a silhouette or placing images on paper background. Additionally, Charlton plays with orientation, flipping images upside-down and sideways. The amalgamation of these manipulations make many of these silhouettes initially resemble amorphous blobs of color. Viewers crane and move in response to the work, looking for the correct position from which to read the image. Some of the works, such as *Icons: Lilac*, are easily read as African statues, although even these are upside down and covered with a glitter surface. Others, such as *Icons: Black*, are less easily read (Fig. 2). For the *Icons* series, Charlton appropriated images of African statues in art history catalogues. She cut out these images, covered them in glitter, and mounted them on paper. Because of the shape of the statues and the angle of the photograph, some of these images become completely unrecognizable through Charlton's manipulation.

These works encourage viewers to consider the importance of context in understanding an artwork. When approaching an African art object for sale, Charlton asks: "Who made this? Who was it made for? Was it used? How old is it? Has it been restored?" She continues this line of questioning through her series of African-inspired masks. Titled *C.O.O.*, standing for Country of Origin, the series critiques collectors who frequently treat African masks as investments based on their perceived ethno-graphic "authenticity," determined in large part by their country of origin. Charlton supplements the *C.O.O.* title with the name of the people group whose style inspired the mask, such as in *C.O.O.: Luba*, inspired by the rounded masks of the Luba people (Fig. 3). These titles are a subtle nod to the history of colonization on the African continent, pointing out that as a result of the European "scramble for Africa" and the delineation of borders at the Berlin Conference of 1884, the names of the people groups do not correspond to the borders of modern countries. The Luba empire, for example, was devastated by the European slave trade and absorbed into the Belgian colonial empire. The Luba people are now one of many groups living within the national boundaries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Referring to a Luba mask by its country of origin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, would erase both the specificity of Luba culture and the history of colonial violence that shaped it. By supplementing the title *C.O.O.* with the name of a people group, Charlton returns some cultural context to the artwork.

However, Charlton also adds an intentional layer of artificiality to her masks, painting them in bright “danger colors” using commercial paints including spray paint and enamel. The colors mimic those found in industrial sites and commercial signage to warn of danger. They mimic the artificiality Charlton notices in the art market, which conflates cultures to market masks from “West Africa” without specificity in regard to the original maker. Charlton further critiques the artifice of the commercial art market by making multiples of her masks and using plastic materials in a mimicry of the industrialization process. As works of art in their own right, these plastic masks push back on the commonly held belief that the most valuable art objects are handmade out of “authentic” materials. As a working artist, Charlton uses the C.O.O. series to comment on the limited definition of art that emerged from colonial collecting practices and impacts her own career. While Charlton is commenting on the limitations that the art market places on African art objects, it is important to remember that she comments as an artist herself, understanding the artistic frustration caused by these limitations.

Two sets of diptychs in the exhibition more literally place the artist into her work, by including the shape of her own body in the artwork itself. *Some Kin* is both, on the left, a silhouette of Charlton, and on the right, a silhouette of an African statue (Fig. 4). The silhouettes face each other. Both silhouettes are placed upside-down and covered with a square. In one set, the women are painted in pink and yellow, while the other set portrays them in black and blue. This orientation, coloration, and abstraction (through the square obscuring the lower portion of their bodies) at once simplifies and complicates the image. Charlton suggests that individuals are often used to stand for an entire demographic as cultural tokens, becoming symbols by which we assume a person’s identity based on limited information. Charlton’s manipulation of these images encourages viewers to instead slow down their reading the work, noticing details rather than recognizing the symbol and filling in the details with preconceived biases. The proportionally enlarged head and straight back of the statue may remind some viewers of African statues found in museums and art collections in the United States. However, the obfuscation of the object and its relationship to Charlton’s silhouette shown opposite encourage viewers to consider the object in greater depth than most museum displays. By placing her own body opposite an African statue, *Some Kin* invites viewers to consider both the assumptions made about African-American women such as Charlton and about African art objects.

In *Luster*, Charlton does not limit herself to commenting on the role of race in the art market. Her work also speaks strongly to the ways in which neutral material attributes are assigned gender and tone. For example, African statues and masks are typically coded masculine when they are brought into an American context. They are often created from rough materials, such as wood, in darker colors. Glitter and pink paint, on the other hand, are coded feminine in an American context. By covering images of African art objects in these feminine materials, Charlton engages in a transgressive gendered manipulation of our assumptions. Charlton says that this transgression is “not negative—it’s just a way of wondering what happens” when gendered boundaries are crossed. Charlton changes the African masks’ gendered associations to critique our assumptions of gender and commodity. Charlton says that depicting serious, collectible art objects in pink glitter both undermines the art market’s gender associations and makes the object itself more playful.

The color pink in particular has a unique history of gender identity. According to fashion scholar Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute Technology, the color was considered masculine when worn by men in the eighteenth century, because of its relationship to red, the color of blood and danger. This association changed during World War II, when Nazi forces used badges of pink triangles to identify and persecute homosexual men. Homophobic feminization of gay men led to the color’s current association with the feminine gender. By depicting African masks and statues in pink, Charlton invokes multiple histories of persecution—that of gay men during the Holocaust, of women throughout history, and of African cultures in the wake of colonization efforts that are perpetuated through the art market today.

In both *Some Kin* and the *Icons* series, Charlton plays with silhouettes as a medium. The artform has a history of use by African-American artists. The medium democratized portraiture before the advent of photography, allowing female and black artists to transcend racial and gendered hierarchies and cultural boundaries in the nineteenth century. The famous Philadelphia artist Charles Wilson Peale employed two silhouette-cutters in his studio: Martha Ann Honeywell, a woman who completed the work despite being born without arms, and Moses Williams, an African American artist previously enslaved by the Peale family. According to Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw in her article “‘Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles’: Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic,” painting was a “higher art” taught to white males including Peale’s children, but the use of the silhouette-making machine known as the physiognotrace was a more mechanical art, taught to anyone capable of helping with the workload of Peale’s museum and studio. Williams was taught to use the machine while he was enslaved by the Peale family, and was thus able to use it as an artistic medium after he was freed, without the formal education in painting offered to the Peale children with whom he was raised. Perhaps the most famous artist working with silhouettes today is Kara Walker, who uses the medium to depict cultural taboos in a discussion of the history of American slavery, racism, and sexual violence.

By choosing this medium, Charlton engages with a history of black feminist art in the United States while achieving her own goals of subverting the assumptions inherent in depicting women and African-Americans. This invocation is particularly timely, as the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, on view May 11, 2018 – March 10, 2019, directly addresses the role of African-Americans in history of silhouettes as an artistic medium, and recently discourse in art history has begun to address diverse mediums and subject matter. This focus on silhouettes signals a break from Charlton's usual work. Her primary medium is drawings, but the use of collage and silhouettes like those in her *Luster* work allow her to focus on seemingly simplistic elements such as color and shape and use them to think differently about the way she depicts people.

Luster invites viewers to apply their own interpretations to complex ideas of race, gender, and commodity. The negative space between the silhouettes of Charlton and of the African statue in *Some Kin* "seems like it might be something," in the words of Charlton. The medium allows Charlton to play with that negative space, exploring what happens to it if she shifts the position of her images or adjusts the contrast of her colors. As Charlton says, "I leave room for the blank space." The viewers are left to puzzle over the white paper canvas, looking for figures and ideas that may be even more abstracted than those of women and African art. In hosting this exhibition, Charlton and the University of Delaware leave room for blank space and invite the viewers into playful reflection on serious topics.

Zoë Charlton received her MFA degree from the University of Texas at Austin and participated in residencies at Artpace Residency (TX), McColl Center for Art + Innovation (NC), the Skowhegan School of Painting (ME), and the Patterson Residency at the Creative Alliance (MD). Her work has been included in national and international exhibitions including The Delaware Contemporary (DE), the Harvey B. Gantt Center (NC), Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (AR), Studio Museum of Harlem (NY), Contemporary Art Museum (TX), the Zacheta National Gallery of Art (Poland), and Haas & Fischer Gallery (Switzerland). She is a recipient of a Pollock-Krasner grant (2012) and Rubys grant (2014), and was a finalist for the 2015 Janet & Walter Sondheim Prize. She received nominations in 2014 for both the Anonymous Was a Woman and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. She is the co-founder of 'sindikit, an artist project space in Baltimore, MD and is a councilor on the Maryland State Arts Council. Charlton is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art at American University in Washington, DC.

Victoria Sunnergren is a curatorial-track Ph.D. student in the Art History department at the University of Delaware. Her research interests include Indigenous art of North America and material culture studies. In January 2018 *Luster* premiered at Grizzly Grizzly, an artist run space in Philadelphia. The tour of this work to UD and associated programming is generously supported by the College of Arts & Sciences, Paul R. Jones Initiative (PRJI).