

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Sick of the 21st Century? These Artists Revive the 18th.

Copycat classicism is here. Literary re-enactments by the photographer Stan Douglas — and a wave of other remixers — are creating new types of art around Black history.

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Stan Douglas, "Overture: In Which Convicted Brigand Captain Macheath Is Transported to the West Indies Where He Will Be Impressed Into Indentured Labour," 2024. Douglas's staged photographs are often meticulous re-enactments, and reimaginations, of scenes drawn from literature and history. Stan Douglas, via David Zwirner

By Walker, Minna

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Which truths are self-evident?

Parallel realities are the specialty of Stan Douglas, the Vancouver photographer who since the 1980s has staged increasingly disorienting scenes of historical re-enactment that often draw on archival research to push the limits of his medium.

Cold War Canada, disco New York, the Arab Spring, forgotten scenes from the history of the old Pennsylvania Station: Douglas reconstructs his moments with all the casting and costuming of Hollywood. He wields flash and toning just right, so that the first glance tricks us. Is [this](#) an actual shot from 1950? Is [that](#) an Eggleston snap from some cokey after-party in 1975? Closer inspection says no, and Douglas leaves us — very much on purpose — to interpret these strange forgeries that want so plainly to be real.

Now the David Zwirner gallery in Manhattan is showing Douglas's longest reach yet: "The Enemy of All Mankind," through Oct. 26, a collection of nine large prints. They depict scenes from a 1729 ballad opera, "Polly," by the English poet and dramatist John Gay, a slapstick comedy of pirates, gender bending and greed in the British West Indies.

The most celebrated playwright of his time, Gay (1685-1732) served up astonishingly self-aware caricatures of human transaction. Writers have since revamped his "Beggars' Opera" to lampoon Weimer Germany (words by Bertold Brecht), Harlem (music by Duke Ellington), Nigeria (by Wole Soyinka) and the Czech Republic (in a rendition by the political dissident and first president of the country, Vaclav Havel).



Stan Douglas, "Act I, Scene VIII: In Which Mr. Ducat Argues to Mrs. Ducat That Polly Has Been Hired as Her Personal Maid While She Suspects Polly Will Be His Live-In Mistress," 2024, was inspired by a 1729 ballad opera. Stan Douglas, via David Zwirner

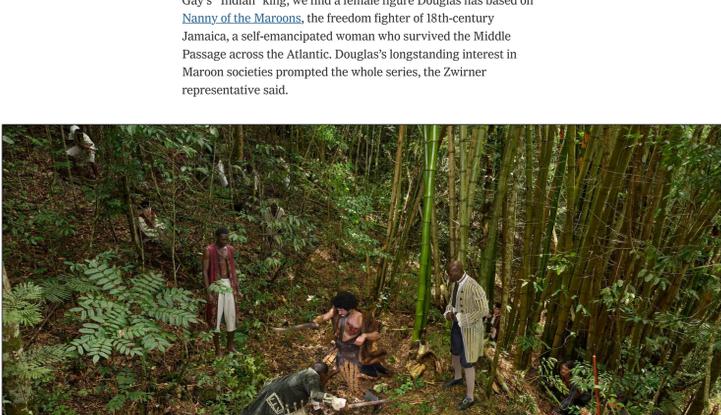
Douglas chose the sequel, "Polly," for its "ahead-of-its-time exploration of mutable identity," said a Zwirner representative. With sizes and aluminum backing that conjure flat-screen TVs, these photos could be stills from "Pirates of the Caribbean." You want to unpause them. Step back, though, and they lead a growing trend among artists to air concerns from the 21st-century — about how race and gender have been told in our history books — by adopting the ironically self-reflective guises of the 18th.

In Douglas's "Act I, Scene V," two women in petticoats and extravagant lace sleeves stand in polite conversation in the tiled foyer of a plantation home. By "Act I, Scene XI," the young brunette of the two has been reduced to a maid's smock and bonnet. She looks defensive. A man in a blue cravat reclines smugly in a Georgian armchair, wagging a finger at her.

Some background: Gay's heroine, Polly Peachum, has shipped herself to the islands from London, chasing the love of her life, a womanizing petty thief named Macheath. He has been sentenced to hard labor on the sugar plantations, and is presumed dead. Polly, heartbroken, is sold to the lecherous plantation owner Ducat (the man in the blue cravat pictured lecturing her). His parquet floors, ornate mirrors and Asian tapestries adorn Douglas's four interior shots.

The other five images take place outdoors. In Gay's version, Polly escapes Ducat by donning male clothes, a disguise that gets her swept up between a band of insurrecting pirates and the "Indians" who virtuously oppose them. The pirate leader is unmasked and killed, but it's the scoundrel Macheath! He has been undercover in blackface, disguised as a marooned slave.

In Douglas's version of that finale, "Act III, Scene VII," instead of Gay's "Indian" king, we find a female figure Douglas has based on [Nanny of the Maroons](#), the freedom fighter of 18th-century Jamaica, a self-emancipated woman who survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic. Douglas's longstanding interest in Maroon societies prompted the whole series, the Zwirner representative said.



Stan Douglas, "Act III, Scene VII: In Which the Pirate Morano (aka Captain Macheath) Challenges, and Is Vanquished by, the Maroon Queen Pohotches," 2024. Stan Douglas, via David Zwirner

Gay's pirate leader, too, has been replaced by Douglas with a light-skinned Black actor, in an effort to be highly faithful to the way a colonial fight might have looked. In other words, [mixed](#) race, Black and marooned castes (and the women therein) [wielded considerable authority](#) in the islands.

Douglas is not alone in his teaching mood. From Zwirner, take the train downtown to Federal Hall, where George Washington took his presidential oath in 1789. From its facade hangs a colossal banner by the Jamaican [Renee Cox](#), showing Cox as Queen Nanny of the Maroons, in a red British frock coat, holding her sword. For sightseers expecting a taste of the great general from Virginia, this temporary public [exhibition](#) — mounted in collaboration with New York University, and featuring several female photographers — is something more confrontational.

If you head north on Interstate 95 from New York, you'll find that unease in another large-scale corrective from an artist. As you approach New Haven, on the right you'll pass "[Composition in Black and Brown](#)," a billboard by the artist Ken Gonzales-Day collaging his photographs of 18th-century marble busts from the [Yale Center for British Art](#), which commissioned the work.



Renee Cox, "The Signing," 2017, is a dramatic reinterpreting of Howard Chandler Christy's historical painting, "Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States." Renee Cox, via Princeton University Art Museum



Ken Gonzales-Day's "Composition in Black and Brown I," which appears as a billboard near the highway, is part of a public art project in Connecticut. Ken Gonzales-Day

Leading at left is King George III, who lost 13 colonies during his disagreement with America. At right, Charles James Fox, the member of Parliament who led votes against slavery. In the billboard's center: a bust of an African from 1753, and an ancient Mexican figurine. In their spatial arrangement, Gonzales-Day seems to be showing the statesmen of that era magnetically drawn to the question of race.

Earlier this year, another re-enactor wrapped a [retrospective](#) at Fotografiska in Berlin: the Senegalese photographer [Omar Victor Diop](#), who [restaged](#) a classic 1797 [portrait](#) of Jean-Baptiste Belley, the Haitian emissary who helped secure temporary emancipation in France's colonies, by the French painter Girodet. Diop wears the requisite blue frock and cream breeches, but sticks a shiny, anachronistic soccer ball where Girodet has placed a bust of the abolitionist Guillaume-Thomas Raynal. Today, Diop's shots seem to say, West African athletes spring from that same font of heroism.

A cynical take would be that these remixes reduce history to a booklet of Mad Libs, going for maximum irony.



The cover of "Rediscovering Black Portraiture," a book by the artist Peter Brathwaite. The image is based on "Portrait of an African Man," by the painter Jan Mostaert. Peter Brathwaite (with photographic partner Sam Bullock)

More interesting is these artists' suggestion that the Enlightenment, with its freedom thinkers from John Locke to Mary Wollstonecraft, left future generations to fulfill its ideals.

As for Wollstonecraft, that ideal was a visible gender equality, and Douglas folds it in obliquely. In Douglas's photo "Act II, Scene VI," a young man is about to steal a kiss from a dressy lady. Study his face, and it's actually Polly in male drag. Douglas frames their kiss from an ambiguous distance, surrounded by epic clouds and billowing trees reminiscent of Georgian England's society portraits.

A similar mischief with gender fills the paintings of Ewa Juszkiewicz. Last fall, for her show at [Nogooian Beverly Hills](#), she copied 18th-century likenesses of noble women, down to the pearl. Except she obscured each face with crazy bunches of painted fabric, as if to ask: What's a model lady if she's nothing but dress?

Whether outrage or sarcasm moves them, what the newer classicists all wield is a scholarly sense of deadpan. (The painter [Ajamu Kojo](#), with his cracked and spottled image of George Washington's dentures, and the whimsical actor-photographer [Peter Brathwaite](#), who traverses history by dropping himself into Rococo portraits in his book "[Rediscovering Black Portraiture](#)," are other examples.)

For Douglas, this specificity makes his prints almost impenetrable without their source text but also bracingly alive to the causal presence of the past. While he is only the latest to take on Gay, Douglas doesn't try to channel the early edgelord's humor or moral relativism. Instead, with the documentary staging and pinpoint clarity of his isolated scenes, what Douglas has supplied — and what his cohort share in spirit — is an oddly engrossing, at times depressing portrait of the way history tends to get read today: with a literal-mindedness about correcting our records, with a desire for cultural reclamation, and with an anxious attachment to our present ways of seeing.

The Enemy of All Mankind

Through Oct. 26, David Zwirner, 525 West 19th Street, Manhattan; 212-727-2070, [davidzwirner.com](#).

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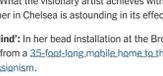
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