THE
CLARK
ART
INSTITUTE

Williamstown
Massachusetts 01267
413 458 2303
clarkart.edu

IN THE FOREGROUND:
OBJECT STUDIES
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"TOUCHING FROM A DISTANCE": ELLEN TANI ON NADINE ROBINSON'S *CORONATION THEME: ORGANON*

Nadine Robinson, *Coronation Theme: Organon*, 2008. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, Gift of John F. Wieland Jr. in memory of Marion Hill

Season 2, Episode 1
Recording date: August 6, 2021
Release date: January 25, 2022

Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)
Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, art historian and curator Ellen Tani takes us into the immersive soundscape of Nadine Robinson's sculptural installation *Coronation* Theme: Organon from 2008, which weaves together complex layers referencing aspects of Black life in America over the last century, from dance halls to hip hop, sacred and secular oration rituals, to police brutality and the civil rights movement.

Ellen Tani
My name is Ellen Tani, and today I'd like to explore a large sound sculpture made in 2008 by the artist Nadine Robinson, entitled *Coronation Theme: Organon*. I first encountered this artwork in 2008, in an exhibition focused on contemporary artists' responses to civil rights photography. It was a moving experience not just to see this work, but to behold it. It's large, suspenseful, loud, quiet, and mysterious. And even though it was something to be seen—a huge black wall of speakers—it was also something to be heard. And heard in such a way that you felt it in your bones, an inescapable object.

This work has inspired so many questions for me about how we are moved to action, about contemporary memorials, about abstraction and absence, and about the paradox of the fight for racial justice as a process of both hope and despair. I recently saw it again and continue to be moved by its mystery.

First, the work is monumental. At 14-and-a-half feet wide and just as tall. It's higher than most interior walls, unless you're in a church or museum. Its form is roughly crown shaped, rising to three pyramidal points at its top edge, the center one the highest. Structurally, it's made of 30 black carpeted loudspeaker cabinets stacked tightly in eight orderly columns. There are two types of speakers involved: tall rectangular boxes with large circular speakers and two or

three smaller holes, and short rectangular boxes with speakers that look like sirens. Together, they create a geometric vocabulary that reminds me of Minimal sculpture, but more textural. In fact, when the sound is playing, you can see them move, just barely. Or like one of Louise Nevelson's expansive assemblages, but bigger, and less expressive visually.

Robinson's assemblage is inspired by the mobile sound systems developed in Jamaica, where she spent a good part of her childhood. These wardrobe-sized stacks of speaker cabinets, called "Houses of Joy," became more popular and powerful in 1950s, with the rise of DJ culture. When mounted to trucks, they fostered the spread of innovative reggae and dub music, as well as political messaging throughout many communities, serving as major sites of gathering, dance, and celebration. Those same sound systems, which were the beating heart of dance hall culture, made their way to New York, where they became foundational to the development of hip hop, and where the artist resides.

The soundscape of this work begins with a slow, dirge-like baseline marked by a high-low drumbeat. The sound of rushing water and far-away cries fades in and out, flickering across the speakers as reverb and echo fill the soundscape with abstract noise. Fragments of gospel cries and oratory punctuate the soundscape, which is interrupted by animal growls, and later by a soaring, acapella chorus that sings in Latin, a triumphant King George coronation theme march. While these layers are sliding in and out of the soundscape, the consistent beat of the march carries time forward with dogged persistence.

Nestled atop the facade, which shimmers overall with the various textures of black surface, plastic, and black carpet, are a range of matte black objects with soft textures. Two conical megaphones point outward, and at the central peak of the wall two batons lean inward against two spheres and an array of cylinders that extend vertically. These geometric shapes are compositional devices that soften the hard geometry of the piece, but they're also amplification devices associated with sacred and secular gathering. Handheld megaphones, for example, are common equipment for being heard in a crowd. Batons can turn

any object into a ready-made noisemaker. And vertical cylinders mimic the upward reach of a massive pipe organ. As for the spheres, they evoke the orb, a symbol of the world or the cosmos.

[musical interlude]

The photo that inspired this work is an image taken in 1963 by Bob Adelman during the multiday civil rights campaign known as Project C in Birmingham, Alabama. This series of organized confrontations—sit-ins, marches on city hall, and boycotts—protested segregation laws in the city and marked a turning point in the movement, in large part due to the widespread circulation of harrowing photographs of police brutality against nonviolent protesters. On that day, youth protesters had stayed out of school to participate. And because the jails were full, police deterred them with force, using batons, high-pressure fire hoses, and police dogs. You may remember one such photograph was immortalized in Andy Warhol's series of *Race Riot* paintings.

Adelman's photo does not show overt trauma, however. A cluster of African American children and teenagers huddle tightly in a park on the left side of the frame, their hands supporting one another's bodies or otherwise held aloft in a gesture of nonviolent resistance. But theirs is also a gesture of structural defense, even victory, as the photographer later observed, against the forceful spray of water that enters from the right side of the frame, held by an unseen source. But how can you communicate the embodied sensation of the youths pictured in that photograph?

When we look at photos of this protest, the pain of resistance resonates in the image of graphic violence. Yet because pictures are contained, we can close our eyes or look away; we can silence the image. Sound does not allow that. You cannot shut your ears, and even when you do, certain frequencies of sound waves will still resonate your body. That low frequency sound, that drumbeat, that marches persistently in the soundscape is called infrasound. It's the kind

that shakes your ribcage. And it's where, as composer R. Murray Schaefer writes, “hearing and touch meet. Hearing is a way of touching at a distance.”

[musical interlude]

Robinson’s sculpture, and its deployment of sound, forces us to feel something in the absence of the documentary photograph. It even invites reverence. Indeed, the artist named the peace *Coronation Theme: Organon* to acknowledge a kind of kingly Trinity. First, the sculpture’s form is loosely based on the facade of Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King preached. Second, it evokes the pipe organ, which Johann Sebastian Bach declared “the king of instruments,” for its power to move people into spiritual ecstasy through sound. And third, it memorializes the achievement of collective action in its crown-like form.

As the artist wrote about the piece: “I want to abstract the idea of almost being baptized in the park through protests, or born again. The wall of black carpeted speakers is meant to simulate the polyphony of the organ, or the aural mix of crowds singing and praying, and the chanting protesters, the many who initiated and sustained America's promise to protect the rights, humanity, and civility of all people.” In this way, *Coronation Theme* is a memorial both secular and spiritual, in its summoning of a certain kind of veneration, channeling the sublime qualities of monochrome painting and Minimalist sculpture, all the while activating a sonic and material history specific to African American life, and deeply resonant with today's atmosphere, which still vibrates with the tension of hope and despair.

Caitlin Woolsey
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Objects Studies*. For more information on this episode and the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. *Object Studies* is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing and musical interludes by John Buteyn, theme music by lightchaser, and additional support provided by Annie Jun, Jessie Sentivan, and

THE
CLARK
ART
INSTITUTE

Caroline Fowler. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.