



Spirit Selector

Renée Stout: At the Crossroads

September 25, 2016 – March 19, 2017

Washington, DC artist Renée Stout is well known for multimedia works exploring the aesthetics and spirituality of her African heritage. Inspired by traditional African ritual objects, the cultures of the African Diaspora, current world events, and personal history, her handmade assemblages reflect a desire to heal and empower the human spirit.

In her past work, Stout employed several alter egos, including Fatima Mayfield, a fictitious seer, herbalist, and spiritual conduit through whom she told elaborate stories, confronted personal challenges, and utilized conjuring—an African-American spiritual folk practice that uses potions, charms, roots, and handmade objects to manipulate supernatural forces. Recently Stout has relied less on these characters and acknowledges, "Where the devices and ritual objects used to belong to Fatima in my stories, they are now mine and really always have been."

In this exhibition, Stout explores the transmission of power "at the crossroads." She believes that humanity is at an important crossroads, navigating through a storm of political and religious conflict and social and economic inequality. Besides being a metaphorical place where decisions of far-reaching consequences must be made, the crossroads is also a physical place where two or more roads meet. Symbolized by a cross, in many religions it represents the intersection of the



Lay Your Hand On The Radio

visible and invisible worlds, where one may contact spirits or witness supernatural events. This location between worlds is often the site of impromptu altars and rituals. In West African culture, people go to the crossroads to seek help and guidance from their ancestors.

Stout has revisited this subject throughout her career, often appropriating the imagery, mythology and symbols associated with crossroads lore. She notes, "The crossroads is a place of chance, choices, and decision making. Everyone has ancestors, and the way I see it, they're all watching, waiting, and wondering if we'll make the right choices to bring the world to a more enlightened place..." Acknowledging our vulnerability at a difficult juncture, the artist provides ritual objects and machines to help us conduct power and tap into spiritual energy at the crossroads. While these items may resemble traditional African power figures and antique communication devices, the artist fabricated all of them from repurposed materials and found objects.

Stout introduces several power figures to provide guidance and protective energy—most notably Elegba, a Yoruba trickster deity who is guardian of the crossroads. Often portrayed holding the keys to the spiritual world, Elegba is customarily associated with the colors red, black, and white, and the numbers three and twenty-one—attributes that Stout incorporates. Her *Nkondi*, with its charms and amulets, relates to traditional Kongo ritual power objects that contain potent magic ingredients and medicine for healing and protection.

To help us detect, receive, and transfer spiritual energy, Stout has created an assortment of monitors, transmitters, and receivers that seem old-fashioned, or even obsolete. She assembled them with a variety of found objects and materials including radio knobs, capacitors, electronic and technological parts, vintage radio cases, wood, paint, and even soil. Stout employs soil to



Elegba (Spirit Of The Crossroads)



Crossroads Transmitter

make objects appear older and more used, but also as a way to inject actual earth into the work. This technique makes some of the objects look like artifacts from an archeological excavation.

Lay Your Hand on the Radio, a wall-mounted cluster of eight constructed "radios" wired to a freestanding utility pole, underscores the transmission of power—in this case, spiritual power. The work is inspired by Stout's childhood memory of her grandmother listening to a radio evangelist who urged believers to "lay your hand on the radio" in order to receive the healing power of his prayers. The numbered dials on Stout's radios allow users to tune into numerical frequencies, but they also offer alternative choices identified by a different word on each dial: Humility, Civility, Compassion, Creativity, Love, Tolerance, Humanity, or Empathy.

Similarly, with Stout's *Spirit Selector* one can dial the intensity up or down, or tune into specific Haitian and Yoruba deities and spirits of the dead. Included on this dial is the number "1916," a reference to the birth year of her paternal grandmother and a nod to Stout's belief in the importance of ancestral spirits.

The concept, "transfer of power," carries additional meaning in the highly charged political climate of the 2016 election year. Stout's machines remind us that at the crossroads we always have the power to choose and she urges us to turn the dial to higher aspirations, like civility, compassion, and love. With their protective energy and powerful transmissions, these metaphorical devices help us receive spiritual power and wisdom from the past, and enable us to imagine a new world of possibilities for the future. Stout's wish for all of us is that we find empowerment and healing at the crossroads.

Mary Birmingham, Curator



Elegba and the Pearl Gourd

Exhibition Checklist

Circuit Board (Lucero), 2014

Wood, paint, metal leaf, mixed media,
found capacitors
18 x 9 ¼ x 2 in.

Crossroads Diagram #1, 2013

Colored pencil on black paper
20 x 25 in.

Crossroads Transmitter, 2014

Wood, latex, paint, soil, graphite, found radio
knobs
14 x 10 x 3 ½ in.

Elegba (Spirit of the Crossroads), 2015

Mixed media
39 x 17 x 13 in.

Elegba and the Pearl Gourd, 2015

Mixed media on paper
19 x 24 in.

Haunted Machine, 2014

Wood, metal, paint, soil, silver leaf, found
technological parts
16 x 10 ¼ x 4 ½ in.

Lay Your Hand on the Radio, 2009-2014

(Collaboration with Odinga Tyehimba)
Mixed media construction: wood, paint, soil,
found technological and electronic parts
70 x 60 x 30 in. (overall)

Nkondi, 2015

Wood, glass, found objects, mixed media
21 x 10 x 8 in.

Spirit Detector, 2014

Vintage radio case, wood, paint, found knobs,
electronic parts
19 ½ x 12 ¾ x 7 in.

Spirit Selector, 2014

Vintage radio case, wood, paint, found knobs
electronic parts
13 ½ x 13 ½ x 6 ½ in.

The Pearl Gourd, 2015

Wood, gourd, paint, found jewelry, metal leaf,
beads
23 x 18 x 10 in.

All works courtesy of the artist

All photos courtesy of the artist and Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, DC



Photo by Matt Forrest

Renée Stout grew up in Pittsburgh and received a BFA from Carnegie-Mellon University. Originally trained as a painter, she moved to Washington, D.C. in 1985 and began to explore the spiritual roots of her African American heritage through multimedia work. Her prints, drawings, photographs and mixed media installations have been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout the US and abroad. Stout was the first American artist to exhibit in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. She has received awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Bader Fund, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation and was also the recipient of the 2010 David C. Driskell Prize. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, The San Francisco Museum of Fine Art, CA, and numerous private collections.

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