**ReSignifications**

**“My color does not disfigure my honor or my wit”**

So declaresbi-racial Portuguese poet and playwright Afonso Álvares in response to racist taunts and prejudices to which both he and his father and fellow writer Juan Matino were subjected in Portugal in the 1500s. [[1]](#footnote-2) Contexts and representations of people of African descent in 16th century Europe variously signified them as spectral presences with limited subject hood despite the diversity of their social standing as aristocrats, priests, diplomats, servants and others. Unlike the past, virtually every European space is populated by more African migrants and people of African descent whose presences are similarly in question.It is the representations and iconographies of presenting people of African descent that sparked the directions of this exhibition.

*ReSignifications* invokes classical and popular representations of African bodies in European art, culture and history. It moderates and subverts their particular artistic conventions and subjects by using the works of contemporary artists to engage in dialogue with the broad historical array of ornamental representations of such bodies. The artists in this exhibition speak against the background of the connected histories of Europe, Africa and the Americas as well as various locations ofAfrican Diasporas. Its premise is from the ubiquitous models of decorative art known as the “Blackamoors” - furniture, sculptures, paintings, and tapestries – that portray African bodies in service, as domestic workers, soldiers, porters, and custodians of palatial properties” initially made in the 17th century and continuously produced through the 19thand 20th centuries.Our own era is peppered with the resurrections and contemporary renditions of these figures across a variety of media and spaces – from private homes, hotels, and museums, to aspirational fashion and jewelry. Carved in polychrome wood, in bronze and marble, glass or other media, their function as furniture, head pieces of other artifacts such as pommels on swords, vases and others begs intense questions. The ‘Blackamoor’ it seems is a figure in ‘civilizational transitions’ which continues to play itself out in Europe and its outposts such as the Americas.[[2]](#footnote-3)For the historical objects whose signifiers denote migratory paths and attendant tensions of residency and citizenship, they sometimes simultaneously read as amalgams of African and Moorish Muslims as they encountered and moderated historical spaces in Europe. Who made them and why? What traditions of decorative art production and collection do they represent? What material histories and cultural meanings do they encode? How might contemporary artists interpret these meanings from diverse disciplinary perspectives? How do artists in our own time re-make these meanings through contemporary works of photography, sculpture, and film?

*ReSignifications* began its expression in Florence, Italy, where its used over 30 Blackamoors in the Acton Collection of Villa La Pietra as a prompt. This abbreviated version of a much larger exhibition is a stop over as it continues its journey to the Manifesta Biennale in Palermo. The exhibition confronts Blackamoor representations with audacious interpretive presentations of African bodies as protagonists of histories and cultures. The exhibition combines styles across time and place to reframe and refract the history of representing African and African diasporic bodies. The unusual and deliberate juxtaposition of historical objectifications of Africans with contemporary projections of subject hood and subjectivity gives *ReSignifications* its texture and flavor, thereby underscoring the defiant words of Giambattista Marino (1569-1625): “Nera sì, ma se’ bella.” (“Black yes, but so beautiful”). [[3]](#footnote-4)

**Awam Amkpa**

***curator***

1. AfonsoÁlvares’ expression is taken from T.F. Earle, “Black Africans versus Jews: Religious and Racial Tension in a Portuguese Saint’s Play,” in T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 347. 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Cited from Ella Shohat in “The Specter of the Blackamoor: Figuring Africa and the Orient” in AwamAmkpa (ed) *Resignifications: European Blackamoors, Africana Readings*. Postcart, Rome. 2017 p.95 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Giambattista Marino in his sonnet“Bella Schiava” (Beautiful Slave) cited in Joaneth Spicer “European Perception of Blackness As Reflected in the Visual Arts” in T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 47. 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)