

Artist Exhibition

Jada Brookes is captivated by French artist Nathalie Boutté's exhibition entitled *Way Down South* available through the online viewing room at the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York.

Nathalie Boutté Isaac Caldwell, 2019



© Nathalie Boutté, Kleinfem, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Nathalie Way Down South BOUTTÉ

Born 1967 in Senlis, the northern French region of Oise, visual artist Nathalie Boutté was much inspired by the 1980s. This turbulent era was marked by growing global capitalism, mass media, discrepancies in wealth, and music and fashion epitomised by electronic pop music and hip hop. It was a time when iconic events like the African Famine, the end of the Cold War, and the fall of the Berlin Wall significantly changed and shaped the world.

The 1980s also made way for the prominent art movements Neo Geo and The Pictures Generation alongside Neo-Expressionism, which became well-known in Germany, France, and Italy. Phenomenal artists like Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente, Jörg Immendorff, Anselm Kiefer, and Julian Schnabel climbed to creative heights. At the same time, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf established street art and graffiti movements.

Nathalie Boutté is an artist that has a close relationship with paper, a raw material that is preferable in her work. She cuts all types of paper, whether it is maps, novels, white paper, printed paper, tracing paper, even banknotes into strips and gives them a new lease of life in her creations. It was perhaps due to her previous career in publishing and graphic design when the process was still manual that she had not abandoned her rottrings and cutters despite the advent of computers.

Her work begins with the photograph, especially daguerreotypes and autochromes, some of the oldest photographic impressions of the fixed image. Having a passion for these images and their histories, Nathalie is influenced by historical photographers such as Edward Curtis, Malick Sidibé, and Seydou Keita. The artist then recreates three-dimensional reinterpretations of old silver

prints by meticulously assembling each paper strip one by one to produce mind-blowing and voluminous artworks.

She has presented her work in exhibitions at the Bellevue Arts Museum, Washington, USA; Leshar Centre for the Arts, San Francisco, USA; Domaine de Chamarande, France; and Museum Rijswijk, the Netherlands, among others. For her first solo show at MAGNIN-A Gallery in Paris, France, she revisited the photography collection of Rufus W. Holsinger, who moved to Charlottesville, Virginia in the 1880s. He eventually became the best photographer in town, renowned for the high quality of his prints.

The American photographer used a wet-collodion process, an old photographic technique that uses a solution-coated glass panel to allow great precision and a rich grayscale in the prints. Nathalie expanded upon his

archive in her research on anonymous African-American portraiture. In 2014, she began a series entitled *The African Choir*, inspired by the portraits of a South-African choir taken in the UK in 1891. It was while conducting this research that she discovered the picture of Nina Sniper by Holsinger.

Charlottesville, as well as other states in the South, is a city marked by a past full of social conflict and racial violence. However, during this time Holsinger photographed more than 500 African Americans in his studio. The collection is housed at the University of Virginia. The archives of this era, notably in the southern United States, very rarely represent African American subjects. Often, it was the black nanny, in the background, who helped to photograph the white infant of whom she was in charge.

Nathalie's exhibition *Way Down South* currently showing at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York until January 2021 is based on the portraits of African-Americans taken in the late 19th century by Rufus W. Holsinger. In a review for *Artsy*, critic Wilson Tarbox described the artist's collages as taking "on a slight three-dimensionality, like fur or plumage. What results, are neither photographs, sculptures, nor any other easily definable media. Rather, they are something new and emotionally charged."

The men, women, and children portrayed are "anonymous persons who carry within them a piece of the collective history. These portraits pay homage to the resilience of the African-American community and their

unity in the struggle against racial oppression. The collection of photographs holds a sentimental value for the families it depicts. It is equally important for its historical value, as a record of this region. Nathalie Boutté makes us look with new eyes on the foundation of identity."

At the forefront of the exhibition is Nina Sniper, whose mesmerising eyes captured Nathalie's attention. Nina is sat posed in a frilly white blouse and a black or grey skirt with one hand resting easily on her lap and the other hanging by her side. Holsinger's photograph of Emmet T. Whitney appears as a duplication as if he was portraying twins wearing uniforms, with the right contrast sharper than the left. Nathalie captures the intensity of Emmet's face in her collage.

The intricate contrast of banknotes is shown in the artist's presentation of Burnett Watson, whom Holsinger captured in his uniform against a grey backdrop. The sweet face of the child, Edwin Jefferson, melts your heart as he poses in a chair. Nathalie captured his head and shoulders in her work. Looking elegant and dapper in a suit and bow-tie, John Crosby poses for the camera in a chair with his hat on his lap. Nathalie re-creates the whole picture.

Another beauty is Fannie Dowell whom the initial photographer pictured seated in a chair wearing a hat and a coat over a white top and dark skirt with lace-up boots. In Nathalie's collage, Fannie's face is the main focus. With one hand on his hip and the other by his side, Golden Coles looks

"Weh Down Souf is a beautiful poem sang as a gospel hymn. I like to think that those, to whom I've paid homage here, once sang it. Their voices accompany me in this travel toward the south" - Nathalie Boutté

relaxed wearing a white or straw hat, a dark suit with white trousers and dark shoes. He appears to be standing under an arch by a flower bush in the original photograph. The distinguished gentleman is captured in this pose.

Three other gentlemen, Orbey Stark, Marshall Mayo, and Leslie Baykin are presented in singular three-quarter length portraits with the subjects isolated in the foreground, making them appear to come forward and meet the viewer. The serene green background catapults them into the limelight bringing the eyes to focus on the intricate details. As you move further away from the picture, you will see the variations in the ink colour of the printed text that remains identical on every strip.

The artist's work is captivating as it interacts old photographs in a different medium. It brings the intensity of the subject's features to the forefront and presents an unmatched beauty. Thanks to Rufus W. Holsinger's initiative to capture African-Americans during the late 19th century and Nathalie Boutté's reinterpretation of these images, it is a piece of history that many of us can hold on to and cherish the memories.

Nathalie Boutté's *Way Down South* exhibition is available to view online at Yossi Milo Gallery until January 2021.

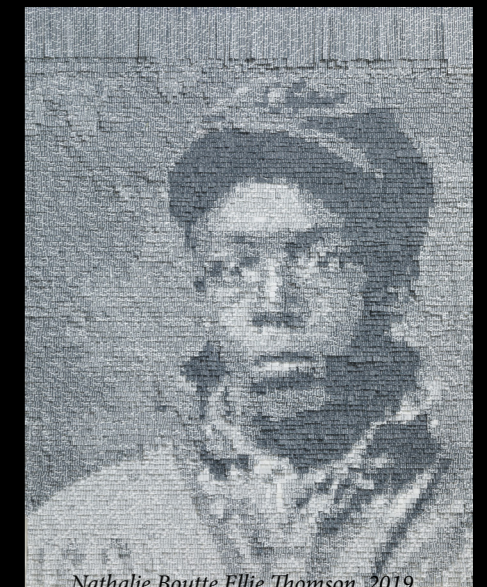
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Nathalie Boutté Nina Sniper, 2019



Nathalie Boutté M. Mme Cooper, 2019



Nathalie Boutté Ellie Thomson, 2019