ART

'I Tawt I Taw a !#*?!'

Familiar cartoon characters take on a shadowy cast in Todd Gray's photographs.

January 05, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Tweety Bird and Mickey Mouse find themselves in pretty racy company this month in an exhibition of Todd Gray's monumental photographs at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery. Moody silver prints of the cartoon figurines, mostly in shadow, share space with blurry pictures of wind-up toys shaped like genitalia and silhouetted couples in compromising positions. Approximately 6 feet tall and bound to the walls with rough steel bands, these photographs are no babes in toyland.

"I wanted to work with ideas of sex, innocence and purity and how the media exploits sex," says Gray. Digging into his pocket, he brings out a windup toy of a man doing unprintable things with a goat. It seems more ridiculous than grotesque, and Gray joins a group of visitors in laughter. Then, in a more serious tone, he adds, "I'm talking about the way entertainment has replaced spiritual ecstasy in our lives."

Gray, 42, began photographing cartoon figurines in 1991, two years after completing his graduate degree at CalArts, a school founded by Walt Disney. While enrolled there, he had noticed how many of the younger students were influenced by cartoons and pop culture. He resisted such imagery at first. "I was making art with gestures toward the sublime," he recalls wryly. "But because of my resistance, there was all the more reason for me to look at it as subject matter." He soon found himself viewing the ubiquitousness of seemingly innocent cartoon characters as a form of cultural imperialism.

"Disney and other corporations market themselves by way of exchanging their cultural icons for the existing icons in Europe or the Third World," he says. "It made me think of reverse colonialism. Instead of taking resources out, we put in our own symbols so people desire our goods and reject their own."

Gray's 3-year-old son Miles has made the artist even more troubled by cartoons. "Seeing my son as a consumer at 3 made me realize that we're surrounded by a machine of imagery, cartoon stars that create little corporate consumers. It made me more cynical."

Gray began including sex toys in his imagery last summer to "create more complexity" in the relationships. He says, "I need to explore areas I resist as a way to break down my own barriers and expand my notion of self. It was a taboo and I had to work with it."

Given Gray's background, it may be surprising he wasn't cynical earlier in life. For 20 years, he has been a successful commercial photographer, yet it was precisely that experience that drove him to pursue his art. This is his first solo exhibition in a mainstream gallery, though his work has previously been included in group shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Oakland Art Museum and the Georgia Museum of Art in Atlanta.

"I've shot over 100 album covers, and of those, two have been by white artists," says Gray, who is African American. "There is a real apartheid system in the entertainment business. If you are black, that qualifies you to shoot black subject matter but if you are white, you can shoot any subject matter."

Gray first encountered resistance to his work in 1979, as an idealistic young photographer with an undergraduate degree from CalArts and a portfolio full of abstract color images. He went to Italy for a year and had his work published in Italian Vogue and Zoom, but when he returned to L.A., he says, he "couldn't get arrested." Black artists weren't interested in his "crazy" images and, he says, he wasn't even considered for album covers for white artists.

"I was hitting these walls," he remembers. "Before that, I was going to art school, everything was groovy and I was making these beautiful photographs. Once I went in the real world, I was feeling contempt and frustration."

Gray did not accept defeat. "I just sat down and analyzed the market and started to put images of black models in a fashion context in my portfolio. And I started to get work."

Until 1983, Gray worked consistently for pop star Michael Jackson as his personal photographer, traveling with him and documenting his exotic world. At one of Jackson's parties in 1981, he met Yukiko Nakajima, a Japanese-born journalist who covers the entertainment industry for Japanese magazines. They were married the following year. But Gray's glamorous life as a commercial photographer did not allow for his feelings of anger toward inequities in the system.

"An art director at CBS once said, 'Todd, you are so pushy.' I said, 'You don't understand. I'm competing with [superstar photographer] Matthew Ralston, who can shoot Streisand, rock artists and the black artists. I can only shoot the black artists and they only represent 15% of your roster. So I'm competing for 15% against someone who competes for 100%.' I tried to be level and unemotional about it. But I got one job [from them] after that and no more work." He throws his head back and laughs.

One outcome of such exchanges was a rage that found expression in his more personal, noncommercial art. Cool, abstract pictures gave way to monumental photo-murals of black boxers fighting against anonymous looking corporate buildings and displayed along the Wilshire corridor. "I wanted my work to signify my emotional state," Gray recalls. "I was thinking about gladiators of the past, dark people who had to fight against domination. The same system seemed to be intact."

From 1983 to 1987, while maintaining his commercial work, he produced the "Urban Myth Series," black-and-white prints of his own bound and nude torso, which were hacked and violated by ranting, automatic writing. "I would read Greek and African mythology and try to navigate between the two. I thought I'd create my own culture."

Gray's frustration was amplified by the expectations with which he was raised. "My parents' value system was to not take anything for granted," he says. "We were privileged, but we had a responsibility to others. You don't forget that or the fact that you are black."

Growing up in L.A., the second son of a professional middle-class family--his father was in sales, his mother in corporate management--he attended predominantly white schools where he was often the only black in a class. "My parents would say, 'They are judging the whole race on you.' I had to make good grades to show that I'm intelligent. It fueled me in life, where I needed to prove myself."

That training enabled him to make the unconventional decision to pursue both commercial and fine art photography. "It was important to show that I could do

both and keep the integrity. It's like this superhuman thing that blacks and other minorities share with women, that we've got to work twice as hard to get half as far."

Nonetheless, around 1987, when Gray found himself becoming immersed in his commercial art, he decided to return to CalArts for a graduate degree. "I recommitted myself to art. I needed to have an understanding of this other dialogue called theory. I knew this level of commitment would ensure that I would not sway," he explains.

It is not a choice everyone would make, but it was a choice he felt he could not avoid. Of his art, he says, "Its my voice, a voice that has nothing to do with the marketplace. It enables me to keep a balance.

"If I were only working in the marketplace, I think I would wake up down the road and have lower self-esteem, he adds. "The commercial work allows me to keep my artistic independence. I've never applied for an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant because I was making enough money to be my own NEA. It's an honest living, but I consider myself an artist first."

*

TODD GRAY PHOTOGRAPHY, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B-1, Santa Monica. Dates: Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Ends Jan. 25. Phone: (310) 453-7535.