



**ARTIST**

Willie Middlebrook

**TITLE**

#294, from the series 'Portraits of My People'

**DATE**

1992

**DIMENSIONS**

24 in H x 19.875 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**IMAGE NOTES**

Unique Gelatin Silver Print Toned Gelatin Silver Print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

1992.024

**CURRENT LOCATION**

Warehouse

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**WILLIE MIDDLEBROOK**

**BORN**

1957

**DIED**

2012

**BIRTHPLACE**

Detroit, MI

## **GENDER**

Male

## **CITIZENSHIP**

United States

## **CULTURAL HERITAGE**

African-American

## **LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 1992

Donation, 2007

by Robert B. Menschel Fine Print Program, 1995

Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1993

## **LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

Contact Sheet 74

Contact Sheet 97

Menschel Gallery Catalogue 31

Contact Sheet 173

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Born in Detroit, Middlebrook moved to Los Angeles as a child in 1960 where he developed his creativity through both his father (who worked on the Disney lot) as well as through formal art education: he studied at Compton College, Art Center College of Design and the Communicative Arts Academy founded by assemblage artist John Outterbridge. In LA, Middlebrook was exposed to the Black Arts scene that gave birth to many artists like Outterbridge, David Hammons, sculptor Melvin Edwards and video artist Ulysses Jenkins. For more on LA's Black Arts movement, check out the catalog for the Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980 show recently on view at PS1 MOMA. Middlebrook built his career as a documentary photographer making work about street life and the people (mostly African Americans) of downtown Los Angeles and Watts, CA. His transition to fine art photography began with what he called his "photographic paintings" which involved spraying and brushing developer to reveal emotional portraits through drips then adding toner and bleach for extra effect.

## **ESSAYS**

Patti Ambrogio Willie Middlebrook Abstracted Identities January 12- March 15, 1993 Identity is not formed by a single idea or a single expression, but rather a myriad of sources and ideas converging and interacting upon the subject. Identity is formed as much by those elements of culture that give it shape as by those elements that disintegrate it. Patti Ambrogio and Willie Middlebrook are grappling, in different ways, with the formation and disintegration of identity. Ambrogio makes images about sexism, motherhood, childhood, sexuality, and censorship, and uses abstraction and photographic manipulation to suggest that these identities and the representation of these identities are not shaped by a single idea or source. Willie Middlebrook is exploring the idea that the ethnic identity of Black male is not formed by a single idea, but is touched and weathered from many directions. Middlebrook's imagery alludes to racism's effect on identity by making pictures of his family, his friends, his community that are powerful and tearful, screaming and silent. Both artists represent their personal and social experience with photographic manipulations that mirror the manipulations of race and gender issues in the more mainstream arenas of image production. Before their most recent manipulated work, Ambrogio and Middlebrook were both making black and white documentary photographs. Ambrogio was documenting her young twin daughters. Middlebrook was documenting the predominantly African American community of Watts in Los Angeles and in another series he documented the homeless. Each photographer was interested in preserving their perceptions for the collective memory, and in offering a view into the respective issues of being female and being Black. Each documented the sphere in which they felt the most comfortable, the most connection and the most conviction; for Ambrogio it was the domestic sphere and for Middlebrook it was East L.A. In both cases, Ambrogio and Middlebrook found that the straight photograph limited their ability to critique or interact with what they perceived and what they recorded photographically. Each photographer wanted to convey an aesthetic language that personalized their experience and their discussion of identity. Middlebrook and Ambrogio felt that identity could not be discussed by a centralized subject or by a single setting, but instead must be represented by issues swirling, fading in and out of focus and prominence, and by any given idea or subject only ever being partially exposed. In their new work, Ambrogio and Middlebrook suggest that they cannot catch that instantaneous moment on film that can epitomize the subject's identity. Instead, identity is transient, never fixed, and always washed by forces that can be identified or by forces that remain just beyond the tangible. By approaching the topic from this perspective, the artists are able to communicate in a way that is in line with their life's experiences. Willie Middlebrook believes that art is about communication, and his communication focuses on the Black male's identity. Middlebrook says, "My drive, my direction, my strong social and aesthetic convictions, from which everything I do comes, stems from my parents endowing me with strong feelings about the ideas and integrity of being Black." Middlebrook's personal history and his strong sense of self provided the foundation for his first documentary series of African American life in Los Angeles. Negative images of Blacks by whites, a lack of Black image makers, and an absence of Blacks in photographs in general, motivated Middlebrook. He has produced images that depict these communities in a "real" light, but to these pictures came the potential for misinterpretation. The same kinds of biases or racist views that are experienced between ethnic groups in LA's neighborhoods had the potential to extend to the image; in other words, what is valued by one culture may be devalued by another. So Middlebrook abstracted and assembled his own notion of ethnic identity, and in doing so he placed the Black male in a new context and gave him a quite different façade that the one depicted in his earlier documentary work. Middlebrook's images are individuals who are touched by humanity and by the effects of racism, but this touch is now depicted symbolically. His Black men are strong and defiant in their posture but are washed and weathered, disintegrating and fractured from many directions by the touch of a symbolic "social" chemistry. In this new work, Middlebrook is making the moment rather than waiting for it. He interacts intimately with his artwork, touches it personally, and is a more active participant in the image's making. Middlebrook paints with light and with photographic chemistry. While the point of departure is a formal studio portrait, the abstracted version is a painted surface similar to that of copper surface when it is exposed to the elements. In the images entitled Portraits Of My People: The Black Male Love Song, we are struck by Middlebrook's desire to give

his subjects strength but to also suggest that this identity is effected by other “elements”. His subjects, and his self-portraits, are touched by racism. His people no longer have “a” personality, or “a” façade, but instead their identity fades in and out and around the multitude of touches that comprise humanity. In the piece “In His own Image,” Middlebrook has constructed a grid that illustrates his personal reaction to the Rodney King verdict. His facial expressions and gestures are those of a Black man as he reacts to watching and listening to the media covering the aftermath of the verdict. He stares into the camera, or at the television set, and puts his hands up to deflect the meaning of the coverage. Middlebrook boxes in his head and thus his thoughts. He covers his mouth, his eyes, and he turns his head to the side as if in defiance. Each gesture counters and reacts to the media representation of Black identity, and in this counteraction, he offers an alternative vision of the Black male identity responding to the verdict. He is washed by racism and his façade is weathered by the repercussions of this mass produced identity. He does not steal, he does not cause destruction, but instead is stolen from and is his identity is disintegrated by the knowledge that all things are not equal and that right does not win over wrong.... Especially if you are Black. Ambrogi’s work is also about a need to communicate, and more specifically, her need to communicate about gender issues. In 1989 Ambrogi was issued with four counts of child abuse and pornography as a result of “potentially offensive” way she had chosen to document her children. The photographs that were censored were those that represented her daughters nude and at play in the family garden, bathing, and dressing. Ambrogi was shocked by this public response to her documentary work. She had difficulty accepting that the images of her children where offensive, and yet it became obvious that there were very specific codes and visual expectations for what was appropriate to document in the private sphere and she had broken these codes. While she could rationalize the need to protect women and children, she became aware that a major component of this censorship was the need to manipulate and veil the identities of women and children in order to uphold certain myths about them. It was this veiling, coupled with her own experience of censorship, that inspired Ambrogi to move away from the documentary form and to instead discuss why and how identity is shaped or broken apart by mainstream representations. Central to Ambrogi’s artwork is the idea that women and children where constantly “harmed” by imagery and language in a variety of medias, and that these images and word, for the most part, go uncontested. Ambrogi’s experience sensitized her to the continuous cultural veiling of female and sexual identities that uphold norms and notions of purity and naiveté. While the issues in her new work are similar to those from her earlier documentary work, she has added new levels of interpretation in order to counter the accepted representations of gender identity. Ambrogi’s work has imperativeness to it now, and its agenda focuses on the representation of gender from divergent sources such as academia and her children’s perceptions. By abstracting and layering these sources Ambrogi brings into question how female identity is shaped by a variety of points of view and by many experiences. Ambrogi’s new work mediates sexuality, the female, and the child by layering meaning upon the images of her own children. This work challenges and questions why sexuality is acceptable in the marketplace yet unacceptable to the artist. Ambrogi’s images further suggest that in order to change attitudes toward women and sexuality the entire realm of representation and language needs to be amended. In Jesse’s Pictures, My Father’s Book, images from the book How to Photograph Women fade in and out of her daughter Jesse’s pictures of Ambrogi bathing during a summer vacation. Text of the child’s perception of her mother’s nude body layer the images with a simplistic awareness that identity is made up of representations, and in turn ask the viewer which they are willing to accept as “appropriate” – the mother with her children or the stylized female from the How To book. Ambrogi suggests that both shape female identity, but that in the accepted codes of image making she is encouraged to accept someone else’s representation rather than her own. Ambrogi, however, is not willing to do this, and instead she continues to make images that challenge how gender identity is formed. In the installation piece entitled Not Seriously Injured, Ambrogi excerpts text, from a New York Times article, about a woman who had been raped in the city. She was “cut on her arms and hands, but not seriously injured.” This text is layered upon an image of Ambrogi’s child, and thus on our next generation. Ambrogi’s piece implies that the child is the inheritor of these cultural codes: codes that perpetuate an attitude of ambivalence toward one of the most serious crimes against women. Like Middlebrook, Ambrogi’s portrayal of female identity fades in and out and around the touch of humanity levying a ghostly and amorphous effect on our culture’s women and children. Ambrogi moved to an abstract form to reinforce the content of her work, but also to add layers to the process of making. As an artist, Ambrogi is interested in using a variety of tools and technologies to create meaning, mirroring how meaning is constructed in other arenas of cultural production. Ambrogi employs the Amiga computer’s digital image processing, a haloid copy machine transfer process, and a variety of alternative photographic techniques as the tools to layer her images. Ambrogi’s process works to inhibit the “accepted” language and representations that fuel the contemporary notions of gender and sexual identity. Many of the representations that we perceive of women and Black male in our daily life are freighted with stereotypes and derogatory identifiers. Middlebrook and Ambrogi understand how these depictions work to make many of the qualities of gender and ethnicity appear manipulated and fragmented. For each artist, identity can only become more clear when it is understood in relation to these derogatory representations, but the artists also believe that a vital part of their process has to be to create new representations to take their place. This is the task taken on by Ambrogi and Middlebrook and their photographs are a vital and telling part of this process. Amy Hufnagel Assistant Director, Light Work Willie Middlebrook is the newly appointed Director of the Watts Tower Arts Center in Los Angeles, and formally worked for the Los Angeles Photography centers. This year he received a Visual Artist fellowship in photography from the National Endowment for the Arts. Patti Ambrogi is a professor of photography at Rochester Institute of Technology and lives in Rochester, New York.