



ARTIST

Nicola Lo Calzo

TITLE

Members of Group Youkoum, Fort Delgres, Basse Terre Guedelupe

DATE

2012

DIMENSIONS

9.44 in H x 9.44 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Series Mas / The Cham Project Artist Proof

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2017.095

CURRENT LOCATION

1114-2D

NICOLA LO CALZO

BORN

1979

BIRTHPLACE

Italy

GENDER

Male

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2017

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 197

BIOGRAPHY

Nicola Lo Calzo, an Italian photographer born in Torino in 1979, lives and works in Paris. After studying landscape architecture, he shifted to photography. His photographic practice and research break down the barriers between art and documentary photography. He is attentive to questions surrounding minorities and questions of identity. Imbued with profound empathy, Nicola Lo Calzo's photographs show the ways in which minority groups interact with their environment, the ways in which they develop strategies of survival and resistance. For nearly five years, he is engaged in a long-range photographic research project on the memories of the slave trade and slavery. This on-going ambitious project, entitled Cham, has been elaborated into different stages in Africa, the Caribbean and America.

ESSAYS

In parts of the American South, where some communities observe Robert E. Lee Day in lieu of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and refer only half-winkingly to the Civil War as "the War of Northern Aggression," the antebellum period is no vestige or history lesson. It remains deeply internalized beneath the surface of modern life and many Southerners readily say it defines them. To be in the South is to mix with ghosts, who can feel as alive as the living. In 2014, the photographer Nicola Lo Calzo, Italian-born and Paris-based, traveled to Louisiana and Mississippi for his ongoing series, Cham, which traces the legacy and enduring impact of colonialism and the slave trade across the African and Afro-Caribbean diaspora. Sections of the project, which Lo Calzo began in 2010, have brought him to Benin and Ghana in West Africa, Guadeloupe and Suriname, Cuba, and Haiti. The U.S. segment is called Casta, the Creole word for "caste." Its focus is the region's three most established communities: Black, Creole, and White. Louisiana and Mississippi share a common history: French colonization, slavery and plantation economies, confederate allegiances, reconstruction, segregation, economic decline, and a wounded sense of pride. They rub up against each other but, as Lo Calzo explains, physical proximity does not translate to interaction. Those who call themselves Black Indians, for example, see themselves as descendants of Maroon slaves and Amerindian resistance fighters, not plantation slaves. White families in Natchez see themselves as heirs of a glorious past linked to cotton, trivializing their involvement in slavery. Creoles, descendants of "free people of color" and inheritors of the oldest black bourgeoisie in the U.S., often ignore their slave forebears. Lo Calzo's photography is not expressly journalistic but borrows from that discipline's rigor. Realism and surrealism collide, as in images of a line of battle reenactors in full dress on the side of paved highway, or of young black men applying blackface, at once clownish and menacing, in a Hilton ballroom. They are portraiture too, even when absent of bodies: unchanged plantation house dining rooms and remnants of slave cabins, a Confederate-era Mississippi flag slumped over a chair, low-slung walls in Tremé with spray-painted depictions of MLK and Malcolm X. Lo Calzo is interested in a portrait of the United States, but also memory, and how it slips into every corner and tints every surface.

Lo Calzo's photographs are not misery tourism, nor are they directly about suffering, yet a trauma haunts them. It manifests in unexpected places, carried and passed down like an inheritance. They conjure the dusty romanticism of Louisiana's Gothic corners, and Lo Calzo's sitters, especially the white ones, can appear embalmed within it, choked by a vaporous gentility that no longer exists, perhaps even for them. In Mississippi, Lo Calzo visits the volunteer performers of the Natchez tableaux. He captures a society matron and her granddaughters swimming in the tulle of their ball gowns, sitting in the period rooms of their historic family homes. They perform their ancestors' upright decorum, but their faces are slack, almost stricken. Much of what Lo Calzo shoots is in some way obfuscated. War reenactors stand inside a cloud of gunsmoke. Shot through a thatch of branches, the steamboat Creole Queen lumbers through a thick mist. In a 19th century portrait of a free woman of color, the sitter stares back at us, the lights of a reflected chandelier obscuring her eyes without diminishing their intensity. This image is in conversation with a dual portrait of Diane H. Destrehan, a descendant of the free woman of color, Catarina Destrehan. The latter appears first standing inside, her back flush against the camera, and then outside, turned slightly but still away, and wearing a headwrap. Her face remains a mystery. Only in the second image does the hint of her profile come into view, a never-resolved glint of clarity. We refer to slavery as "America's original sin." Such Biblical heavy-handedness makes it no less true; slavery's echoes linger and reverberate across centuries like a creation myth. Its shape mutates, but it has always been with us: Jim Crow laws, segregation, disenfranchisement, red-lining, mass incarceration, police brutality, municipal water crises. It becomes smoother, more seamless, more elegantly incorporated into the weft of the social fabric. Lo Calzo's images don't exorcise these ghosts, nor is that his intention. He presents them back to us, a latter-day de Tocqueville in America, with new eyes. Max Lakin Nicola Lo Calzo lives in Paris, France, and completed his residency at Light Work in September, 2017. Max Lakin is a writer and journalist in New York City. www.maxlakin.com