



The artist as a dominating black male in "The mythic being: its doesn't matter no.1-3". Private collection

Concepts in art

White longing to be black so as to be angry

US artists often live out national identity neuroses: Adrian Piper takes up the racial complex

NEW YORK. Nigger, famously, is a term only to be bandied by the blacks themselves and I well recall the frisson of excitement when I first saw Cypress Hill brandishing that word on stage, despite the distinctly Caucasian hue of their frontman. There were no objections because, whatever he might be on the census, the man was clearly a bona fide,

hard-core black rapper. Indeed, the phenomenal popularity of hip-hop and rap has definitively confused the issue of racial identity. When Mailer wrote *The White Negro* jazz was a black musical form and way of life embraced by white middle-class Americans, but its appeal was limited to a relatively small, sophisticated elite. In the words of James White: "Well he's almost black, that nigger's white, he's got some moves but they ain't right." Thus there have always been white Americans who strongly identified with black culture but

never on today's vast scale, when no teenage community of any ethnic origin seems immune to the gangsta thang. As a result there are numerous youths of every complexion trying to "pass" as black and with the exceptional exception of Michael Jackson practically no blacks trying to "pass" in the traditional, opposite direction. The art world has long harbored the original pioneer of this paradox in the person of Adrian Piper (b. 1948). Piper is a white woman who claimed to be black and proceeded to make work about how angry she was

that people assumed she was white. In the simplistic and categorical context of American racial identity this project remains unique and important in that it forces us to think about how we automatically make such definitions. Throughout black American history there have been key figures who, like Piper, were actually white, including W.D. Fard of Detroit, who in the early 30s was one of the first to wage war against "The White Devils" and helped instigate what would become The Nation of Islam. Studying Piper's three concurrent shows in New York, it becomes clear that this work has been misinterpreted due to her own presentation of herself as some sort of didactic Marxist activist. As should be clear from the perversity of her original position, Piper is actually a supreme eccentric, a brilliant original in a line of Dadaist provocateurs, more Beatrice Wood than Angela Davis. She is also an artist of amazingly mixed media and ability.



by Adrian Dannant

cliché's operating in such mainstream adverts but are so effective a D-tournament precisely because of their sheer graphic beauty and sexiness. The contrast with "The Color Wheel Series" over at Paula Cooper Gallery is quite mind boggling, going from zenith to nadir in the space of one street, from 20th to 21st. This project, which has been gestating since 1991, is so awful I can hardly bring myself to describe it. Suffice to say it is something to do with the Pantone Color Formula Guide, Shiva and the principles of Vedanta and that the actual results, offset Chromacopies of Photoshop manipulated pictures, are entirely ugly, unconvincing and

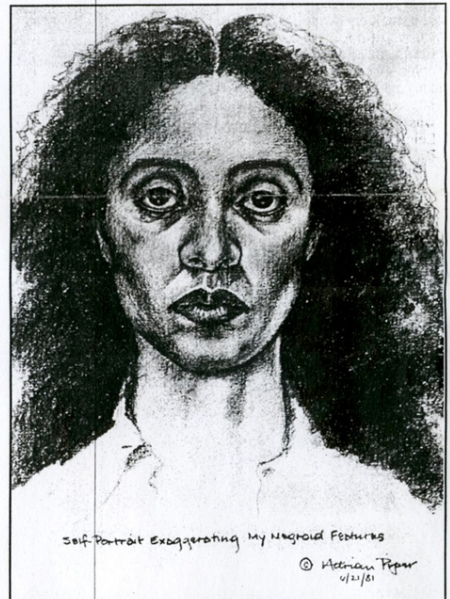
GARY BRUDER, LLC

The Prints and Posters of Toulouse Lautrec



HENRI DE TOULOUSE LAUTREC (1864-1901) *Eldorado: Aristide Bruant*, 1892
Brush and spatter lithography. Printed in five colours on wove paper, 58 1/2 x 39 inches. Wittrock r 5

300 ALBANY STREET NEW YORK, NY 10280
TEL 917-318-2134 GBLAUTREC@AOL.COM



"Self-portrait exaggerating my negroid features" by Adrian Piper, 1981. Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica

Thus, simultaneously, Piper can offer one of the best gallery exhibitions in all New York and one of the very worst.

At Thomas Erben Gallery, the collection of Piper's early drawings and other works is a tightly curated show without a dud in sight.

The greatest pleasure is in discovering a whole suite of minimalist drawings created by Piper in the late 60s, beautiful, bold and outrageously buyable compositions that give any formalists of that period a run for their money.

This wondrous wall of works on paper is complimented by her drawings on the pages of *The New York Times*, sketched over advertisements featuring black women. These embracing naked figures are utterly sensual and erotic. They may critique the

amateur. Extreme fluctuation between the excellent and abysmal is also much in evidence at Piper's long overdue retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Her cartoon bubbles and photofit versions of her own face, exaggerating her hopefully negroid features, her collages of herself as a threatening black man, the comic edge behind all this aggressive play is surely obvious to any but the most literal viewer. Piper is not afraid to exhibit all her researches, experiments and failures in public and there is a boldness to this attitude, a whiff of "fuck-you" very welcome in today's polite and acquiescent contemporary market.

Adrian Dannant

- ◆ "Adrian Piper early drawings and other works" at Thomas Erben Gallery, 516 West 20th Street, New York 10011, ☎+1 212 645 8701, fax+1 212 645 9630 (until 20 January)
- ◆ "Adrian Piper from the Color Wheel series" at Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 West 21st Street, New York 10011, ☎+1 212 255 1105, fax+1 212 255 5156 (until 6 January)
- ◆ "Adrian Piper: A Retrospective" at New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, New York 10012, ☎+1 212 219 1222, fax+1 212 431 5328 (until 21 January)