



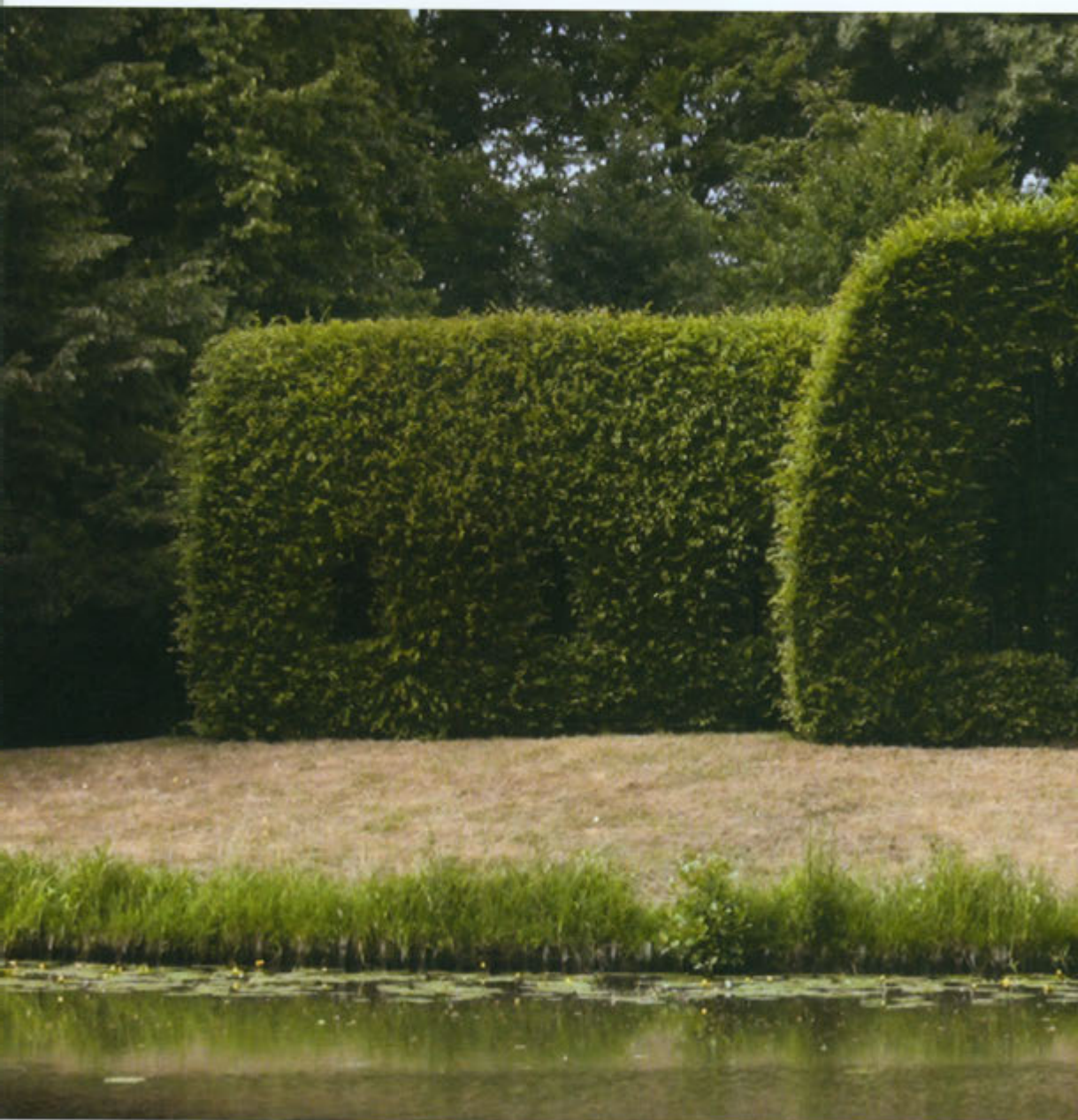
**stephanie dinkins**

**This Land Is My Land**

September 12 - October 17, 2009

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

As a video installation artist, Stephanie Dinkins has traveled across the globe while examining notions of Americanness and race at home. The work Dinkins presents in *This Land Is My Land* retains her genuine ongoing interest in orchestrating a visual dialogue that begins as an autobiographical mirror pointed in the direction of the world. Her video works start as an illumination of American black life, of her life within our collective lives; from that arguably quiet interior posture, Dinkins also imagines a series of negotiated accounts to provide contemplative space for every viewer. To create that prospect, Dinkins transforms a broad mesh of historically American chords into a series of potential questions to engage the intellectual palettes of her prospective viewers. Her works emit a sense of travel at home and abroad, particularly with regard to our sense of American questions (if we are willing to have them) about certain, perhaps long-held, structural



negate the stillness that she finds unsettling in photographs. To remain close to her foundation in photography, Dinkins employs video as a meditative element in her loosely formed narratives and regards her short-looped videos as more closely related to photographs than film. As a whole, the body of work Dinkins presents here evokes the tone of the final line of Ann Spencer's minimalist poem "Neighbors." "You must have a soul to clutch," Spencer wrote decades ago. With her work, Dinkins pushes those questions to a nuance just short of an implication, to an area where she candidly imagines the discovery of a route to an unencumbered future.

Approximately one month before *This Land Is My Land* was scheduled to open, I sat down with Dinkins, an interdisciplinary artist and associate professor at Stony Brook University, to talk about her process of uncovering, tracing, and attaching a combination of tangible local and historical elements to her ideas of an art-driven response to American life.

**Calypso** During the balancing act you present in *Americana*, which is the first piece viewers see from your body of work here, you seemed somewhat steady up until the first third of the walk...then you appeared unsteady as if you never caught your balance entirely. The mountainous landscape you chose to project over the pages of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* is somewhat similar to the work of the late landscape painter Robert Scott Duncanson and the book pages resemble multi-colored bouillon cubes or ingredients. Why did you choose to combine the novel and the landscape? Do you think that the American landscape is equally as dangerous as the gesture depicted in your walk across the front of Ellison's text?

**Dinkins** For me the broad landscape presented in *Americana* represents the promise of America. I've been told by the culture and by my family that America holds a lot of promise. I believe this and, believe me, I consider myself privileged in many ways. Yet at the same time, we receive subtle messages that America is a dangerous place, especially for black people. We learn to negotiate our surroundings in particular/peculiar ways to survive both mentally and physically. An example of this would be the fear of ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time. So you hear of the promise of America, you feel the promise of America, yet at the same time there is an almost constant negotiation of the country you call home. This struggle dampens the promise and for some makes it feel entirely out of reach. In my mind, *Americana* depicts the feel of this negotiation and a will to keep going in the face of persistent subtle antagonisms. The video is a short loop; in it I struggle, over and over, but I never fall. I think of *Invisible Man* as part of a readily available prescription for a condition America prefers to ignore. I used this book because I don't understand why it isn't widely read in American high schools, and I literally wanted to present it as an option for viewers. Of course I don't think anyone is going to read the book in this form but they have to become curious about the text and what it might hold. I project the image of struggle on the pages of the book to evoke questions about the promise of America.



**Calypso** To create your installations, you've traveled to a wide swath of countries. For the piece *Iconology*, you traveled to Germany and recorded local video and sound to create the piece. If you were to juxtapose *Americana* and *Iconology*, since you were struggling to some degree to negotiate a landscape in *Americana*, I was wondering why you opted to remain relatively still in *Iconology* as an installation?

**Dinkins** *Iconology* is a site-inspired work composed in a place that I visited but have no real claim to. When traveling outside of this country, I feel much freer than when I'm in this, my own, country. I believe this is because I know the myths here. In most other countries I generally don't know the cultures and languages well enough to internalize the myths and prejudices





that may be present in the places I visit. This lack of knowledge allows me to be more open and fluid about how I travel through these places. *Iconology* was created in Bremen, Germany. I was very comfortable there but intuitively still felt the need to claim a small piece of it, in video, for myself. Here I am again negotiating, but negotiating a give-and-take, an ability to be seen with little confrontation. With this piece I was thinking of a Madonna. When you see paintings or statues of a Madonna, she is generally presenting a compassionate gaze meant to engage and draw empathy from the viewer. I am doing the same. I was also drawing on the tradition of black Madonnas in Europe, especially in Poland, for this piece. *Iconology* presents a kind of quieter identity. It relies much more on beauty and the ambivalence of the gesture to connect with viewers than *Americana* does. For these reasons and its relative lack of motion, I think of it as a painting.





**Calypso** Toni Morrison has said somewhere that the novel *Beloved* was about black people reclaiming their body parts. Since you see yourself as an element in your work, I was wondering what sort of articulated messages does your work convey about black female identity?

**Dinkins** I'm a big fan of Toni Morrison. Much of my work is about claiming and/or reclaiming space to be who I am, as I am. The work seeks comfortable space to exist in without doubt. Being able to say, "I'm here, my people have more than earned my place here and I'm taking what is due me." Much of the desire to reclaim stems from history, while other parts of it are the result of my upbringing. Being raised in a predominantly white neighborhood and being the only girl in a family of boys meant feeling on the outside of most things and constantly fighting for space to belong to family and to the many outside communities I intersect. Eventually I came to the realization that I am who I am because of these things. Others would just have to deal with the me I've become. I don't know if people notice, but I've been wearing the same dress in many of my works for more than ten years. This dress is important to me because when I first started making these kind of works, I was thinking of myself, through the imagined lives of my ancestors and what their journeys have made possible for me. Through this simple gingham dress, I imagine my connections to broken histories and experiences I don't have access to through family lore. As such, it is a call to remember. One of the things that happens to the history of blacks and slavery in the United States is a desire to expunge it. But how can I erase the horrific parts of America's past without erasing myself? A lot of my strength grew out of that history. No matter how ugly or full of struggle that foundation might have been, I certainly don't get to be the person I am without this legacy. The dress is a reminder of that foundation. It ties me to the past and makes way for the future. The dress has stood for a lot over the course of the work, but now I'm ready to make work from a different place. By giving the dress a rest, I'm giving myself the freedom to create from a broader perspective.

Anthony S. Calypso has written about religion, culture, technology, and business for publications including the *Journal News*, *Essence*, *Black Enterprise*, and *Uptownlife.net*. His essay "Kung-fu" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2006. He currently teaches at The New School and is at work on a novel.



beliefs on identity, race, and over-arching human concepts. Dinkins pushes her work towards the notion of experiencing life as an art-making exercise, which inherently affects the singular role of functioning in a pluralistic environment. The New York native was introduced to art and making by watching her grandmother create objects to decorate her home through ingenuity and, in many instances, raw improvisation.

Dinkins studied photography at the International Center of Photography in New York City and at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore twelve years ago. Yet even then, Dinkins was already searching for ways to generate a sense of motion within the still images she captured. At about the same time, Dinkins began conjuring her grandmother's influence and, by doing so, began combining image, time, and object in an effort to



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