

Michael Paul Britto (b. 1968, New York) lives and works in New York and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Media and Communication Arts at The City College of New York in 1999. He has been included in the group exhibitions: AIM 26, Bronx Museum, New York (2006); Black Panther Rank & File, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2006); S-Files, El Museo del Barrio, New York (2006); The Whole World is Rotten, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio (2006); and Frequency, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2005); S-Files, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan (2006), Multiplex, The Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN (2005), Art's Reflection Has No Complexion, ArtistsSpace, New York (2005); The Freedom Fighter's Project, Rush Arts Gallery, New York (2005); Veni Vidi Video II, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2004); Photofest 2002 New Media, Diverseworks, Houston (2002); and It's Bigger Than Hip Hop, Rush Arts Gallery, New York. Britto's work has been reviewed or featured in Art in America, Frieze, The New York Times, Time Out New York, NYArts, The Brooklyn Rail, and the San Francisco Chronicle. Britto works with children and young adults as a media coordinator at the Boys Club of New York City and Downtown Community Television Center's (DCTV) Pro-TV youth program. He has worked at the Children's Arts Carnival in Harlem teaching basic video production and at the Visual Knowledge Program at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, creating lesson plans on race narrative.

Exhibition Checklist:

Dirrty Harriet Tubman Poster, 2005, 6 x 4 feet. Courtesy of the artist.

Dirrty Harriet Tubman, 2005, digital video, single channel, length: 5 minutes, 5 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

I'm A Slave 4 U, 2005, digital video, single channel, length: 6 minutes, 36 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Michael Paul Britto will discuss his work on November 16, 2006 at 7:00 pm at the Contemporary.

cover image: I'm A Slave 4 U (video still), 2005, digital video, single channel, length: 6 minutes, 36 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

The Contemporary Project Series introduces current work by emerging and established artists that is experimental in nature. Michael Paul Britto: Dirrty Harriet Tubman is organized by Chief Curator Shannon Fitzgerald.

Funding for the Contemporary Project Series has been generously provided by the Arts & Education Council, Missouri Arts Council, a state agency, Regional Arts Commission, William E. Weiss Foundation, Whitaker Foundation, and Friends and Members of the Contemporary, with in-kind support from the Chase Park Plaza Hotel and The Fox Theatre.



CONTEMPORARY PROJECT SERIES 2006

MICHAEL PAUL BRITTO: DIRRRTY HARRIET TUBMAN

SEPTEMBER 15 - DECEMBER 31, 2006



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Dirrty Harriet Tubman (video stills), 2005, digital video, single channel, length: 5 minutes, 5 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Michael Paul Britto: *Dirrty Harriet Tubman*

The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis is pleased to present two recent single channel video works by New York-based artist Michael Paul Britto as our Contemporary Project Series 2006.

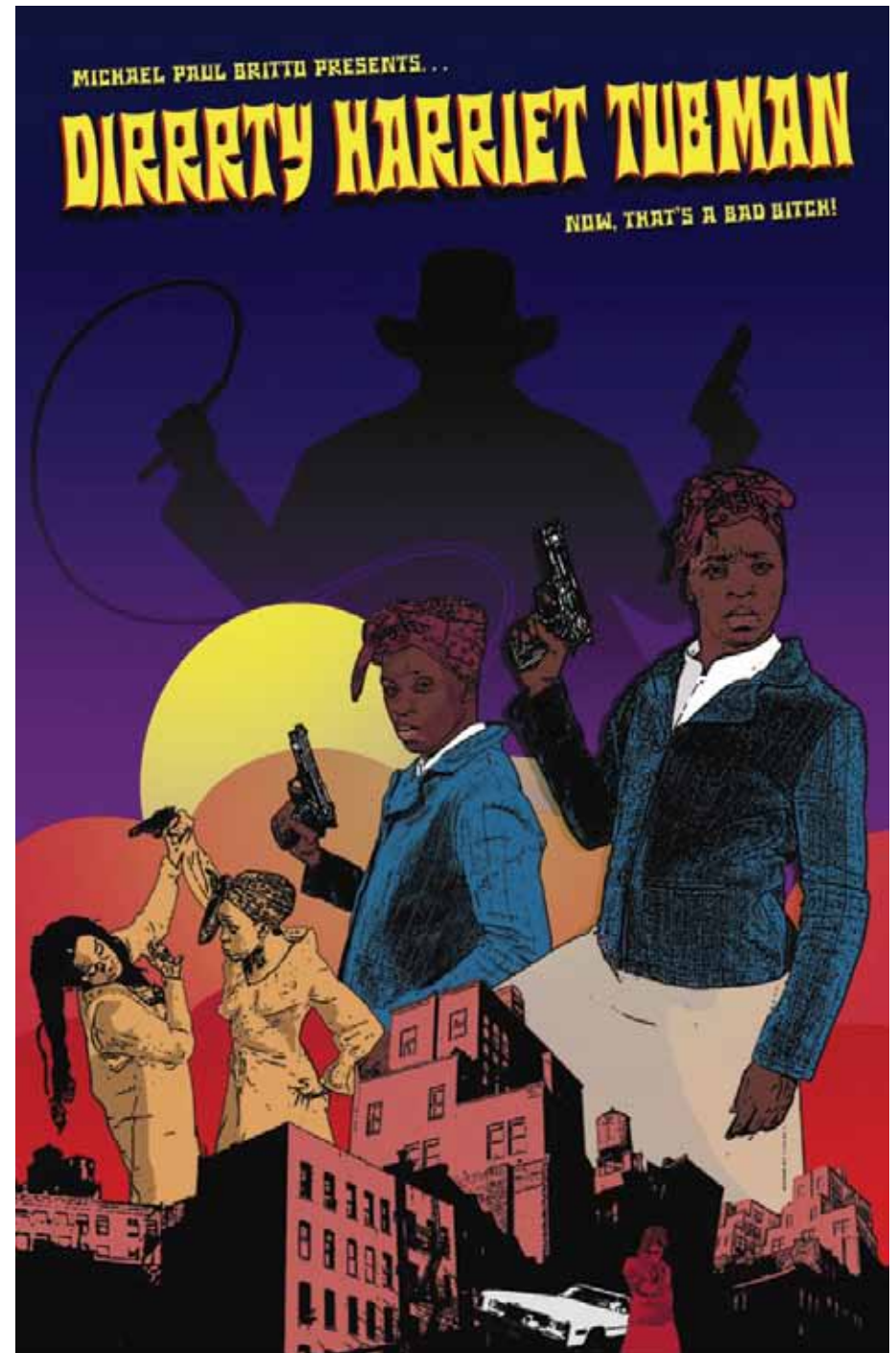
The first work, *Dirrty Harriet Tubman*, is a funny and irreverent action-movie trailer that presents a unique re-imagining of freedom fighter Harriet Tubman as a blaxploitation super heroine. Contrary to the most common, indelible image of an aged Harriet Tubman from our cultural imagination—a maternal stateswoman, a gentle grandmother—Britto's Tubman is re-imagined as a youthful, agile, and strong Pam Grier-like character. She is ready to free her people and take-back-the-night as her perilous trips are reenacted in a contemporary setting wherein nothing deters this fearless Underground Railroad conductor from her mission.

Britto is interested in reevaluating historical circumstance with a humorous corrective lens, and in an immediately recognizable and accessible format. Aware of the recent revival of interest in cinema and 1970s culture, particularly interest in the proliferation of action and Kung-fu B movies, Britto acknowledges the influence of a genre that largely disappeared into obscurity in the 1980s. While textbooks may tell us about Tubman's legendary accomplishments that altered the course of American history, Britto adds another dynamic layer to the woman who brought freedom to so many—that she was also young. Co-opting tropes of blaxploitation by bestowing Tubman with youth and a persona that matches her revolutionary actions, Britto presents an identifiable legend. Just as the films that provide source material for Britto's work generated a huge poster industry, he likewise has created a drama-filled poster to accompany his trailer. This comical trailer and poster call attention to a continuing struggle for freedom and self determination that is still evident even among a post-80s generation.

The second work, *I'm A Slave 4 U*, presents a Britney Spears music video that is completely recast with black actors wearing 19th century slave costumes. Staged in a theater, Britto reworks the choreography to create a dance sequence based on common slave practices like domestic chores and picking cotton. The exaggerated gestures and movements of the dancers work to enhance Spears' lyrical content and effectually render her portrayal of herself as hot-for-you, sex-slave absurd. Replacing Britney Spears is a fully clothed, gun-wielding Tubman who, as the central character, animates plantation labor set to a seductive soundtrack as a way to examine the internal complexities of race in a non-confrontational way. Britto states "My art allows me to make people more politically and culturally aware by using the customary as metaphor. . . I like to challenge the viewer and ask them to remember the past, and pay close attention to what we accept in our everyday lives as being acceptable behavior in popular culture."

In both of these works, Britto manipulates popular culture to elicit various feelings of rage, happiness, sadness, and empathy by provoking viewers to rethink how the mass media perpetuates racial and gender stereotypes. Britto uses humor to examine the discourse of black icons from a wide range of subject positions and perspectives. He uses the poster, movie trailer, and music video format as a platform to twist particular histories into compelling visual narratives that conflate truth in order to challenge perception.

Shannon Fitzgerald
Chief Curator



Dirrty Harriet Tubman Poster, 2005, 6 x 4 feet. Courtesy of the artist.