

***Black Mirror / Espejo Negro* by Pedro Lasch and Jennifer A. González**

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Lasch, Pedro and Jennifer A. González. *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*. Durham, N.C.: John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2010. 111 pages; 41 illustrations. \$35.00 hardcover.



This short, well-conceived exhibition catalogue walks the viewer through Pedro Lasch's *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* exhibit, which was on view at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University from May 22, 2008 until January 18, 2009. The title, *Black Mirror*, plays with three different instantiations of reflective glass: the Pre-Columbian mirror associated with the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca, the nineteenth-century Claude mirror, and the glass lens of a camera. Lasch, a professor in the department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University, conceived of the project as several interconnected elements: the objects in the exhibition space, the wall texts accompanying the objects, the thirty-nine archival photographs organized into five suites, and the exhibition catalogue that consolidates the various components. Rather than simply document the exhibition, Lasch transforms the catalogue into a work of art that recreates the physical experience of the exhibition through large-format images and reproductions of the wall texts. The immediate sense of "being there" is reinforced by Walter Mignolo's essay, which leads the reader in a meandering tour of the show. The three other essays in the collection, written by Arnaud Maillet, Jennifer A. González, and Pete Sigal, elaborate on themes introduced in the wall text, providing extensive historical information on a range of topics from Claude mirrors to Pre-Columbian divination practices. By including various views of the objects, the wall texts, and essays that expand upon major ideas of the project, Lasch creates an indispensable catalogue for any reader unable to visit the exhibit.

Lasch developed the concept for the exhibition out of a seminar on recycling and as a response to a concurrent exhibition at the Nasher Museum titled *El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Phillip III*, which featured Spanish Renaissance masterpieces from the

Prado and other collections. The exhibition paired sixteen Pre-Columbian sculptures from the Nasher Museum of Art with eleven reproductions of Spanish Renaissance paintings exhibited under black panes of glass. The Pre-Columbian sculptures, drawn from different periods and regions, are elevated on white rectangular pedestals and face the black surfaces. The glass simultaneously reflects the sculptures and allows the Renaissance painting to show through, creating a visual encounter between the Pre-Columbian and Spanish cultures. The accompanying wall texts for each pair in the exhibition linked the two objects through material similarity, symbolic resonances, or formal resemblance. By finding commonalities between the Pre-Columbian sculpture and Spanish Renaissance painting, Lasch encourages the viewer to meditate on the historical interactions between these two civilizations. Lasch photographed each of these pairs from five different angles (Suite 2 “Back View”; Suite 3 “Painting-Sculpture Confrontation”) and these are woven into the book, giving the reader a sense of the viewing experience long after the exhibition itself closed.

The second half of the exhibition catalog contains brief essays by four scholars, who each expound upon a different aspect of the show. In "Decolonial Aesthetics: Unlearning and Relearning the Museum Through Pedro Lasch's Black Mirror/Espejo Negro," Mignolo leads us into the exhibit through the eyes of an unnamed “traveler” accompanied by a historian of European art and an archaeologist. Meanwhile, in his own essay, "Black Mirror, Ink Mirror: Fascination as Entrapment," the French art historian Maillet stresses the divinatory ink well as one manifestation of the black mirror, and supplies a genealogy for the dark pool of reflective liquid from ancient Assyria to more modern manifestations in Borges's short story, "The Ink Mirror" (1933). In "Stone Muse," González situates Lasch within a lineage of artists engaged in the practice of institutional critique, arguing that Lasch challenges museological display conventions that traditionally separated Pre-Columbian sculptures from Spanish Renaissance painting. Finally, in "Colonial Reflections/Magical Imaginations: Pedro Lasch's Tezcatlipoca," Sigal claims that Lasch transforms the gallery into a sacred space where black mirrors reflect and confound Pre-Columbian sculptures with Spanish Renaissance figures and the visitor's own body. This confusion of bodies destroys the visitor's cohesive sense of self; like the trickster god Tezcatlipoca ("Smoking Mirror"), Lasch has duped the visitor since Pre-Columbian identity is always already mediated through a colonial and postcolonial gaze.

As both a catalogue and a text unto itself, *Black Mirror* contributes to discussions in the fields of museum studies and art history. In museum studies, this exhibit intervenes in ongoing conversations about practices of collection and display, as well as debates over the location of artifacts and art objects in different types of institutions. The exhibition and the essays will also be of interest to art historians studying institutional critique, appropriations of the Pre-Columbian past, and art that defies temporal boundaries, bringing together ancient and contemporary work. Finally, *Black Mirror* should also prove valuable to scholars of cultural studies interested in decolonial artistic practices.

However, despite the exhaustive nature of the catalogue, some questions remain. In his

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presentation of the exhibition pairs, Lasch could have better illuminated the acquisition practices of the Nasher Museum of Art by tracing the history of the objects collected beyond the designation “gift of” and interrogated the deeper provenance of the objects on display. How did the object come to the donor, and what role did the Pre-Columbian object serve in the museum’s collection? Similarly, more consideration of the original function and context of the Pre-Columbian objects could have enriched an interpretation of the pairs. For example, the censer of Ehecatl was originally used to burn incense to purify a ritual space. The sacred context is suggested by Sigal’s essay, but only in relation to the use of black mirrors and not to the object’s intended purpose. One final concern is that the Pre-Columbian objects are often lumped together by thematic or formal similarity, usually to create a cohesive relationship with the Spanish Renaissance painting. Unfortunately, this approach collapses the cultural differences, time-periods, and geographical specificity of these Pre-Columbian societies as they face off with the European tradition.

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