

## Kojo Griffin

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In Kojo Griffin's new mixed-media panels, enigmatic figures enact scenes redolent with anger, desire, sadness, pain: A man shakes a screaming child; two men face off, one holding a knife; a woman's joyful play with a toddler is shadowed by the sadness of an excluded male figure in the distance. The characters are strange creatures—people with animals' heads or patchwork effigies that look like the offspring of a teddy bear and a crash-test dummy. Because they are engaged in human interactions but aren't exactly human, they become emblematic of emotional states and interpersonal tensions abstracted from particular circumstances.

The spaces in which the figures threaten, love, comfort, and abuse one another have the elegant asymmetry of Japanese prints. Large rectangular areas evoke interiors or urban outdoor scenes with lines implying the place where a wall meets the floor or the street. Each figure or element has its own unique, highly saturated hue. Deployed over visible grid lines, Griffin's images seem cartographic: As on a map in which bordering states are differently shaded, the colors create clear distinctions among the characters and between them and their environments. But just as the scenes lack narrative context and identifiable characters, so too do they lack specific social and geographic clues. Griffin's spaces contain his figures and their actions without explaining them, leaving the images uncomfortably ambiguous: In *Untitled* (two men standing, woman crawling) (all works 2000), for instance, the men may be threatening the woman or rushing to her aid.

The show's title, "Field Theory," refers to a branch of physics whose premise is that the action and interactions of physical properties within given spaces are determinable and can be described mathematically. Griffin's pictures both entertain and challenge the notion of such a rational system of accounting for human behavior. The works contain references to a range of pictorial languages—spiritual, symbolic, and scientific—intended to represent the various forces that surround and shape human existence. Each work includes hieratic symbols and words drawn from the I Ching and the Cabala, mystical texts that offer numerical but unscientific systems for understanding and predicting life, suggesting alternative ways to explain the kinds of events depicted. In *Untitled* (couple embracing), for example, intertwined lines suggestive of DNA strands imply a genetic basis (or consequence) to the lovers' attraction, while overlaid drawings that resemble engineering diagrams evoke a mechanistic rather than a biological perspective on their coupling. Griffin's use of snowflake patterns in the monumental *Untitled* (group scene), in which three standing figures menace a fourth prone figure, undermines a trite symbol of tranquillity and beauty by making it the backdrop for an image of violence. But it also raises the question of whether the depicted act is, like a snowflake, a random, unique, and natural phenomenon.

Griffin's technique is in tension with his orderly, seemingly dispassionate mapping of human vagaries. Both the protagonists and the background elements are layered onto the wood panels; collaged, drawn, or printed elements overlap both figure and ground, breaking down their seemingly dear distinction. Like many of the characters that populate them, Griffin's images are themselves patchworks of disparate methods and materials. The apparent neatness and clarity is a surface deception; the underlying reality is much more complex and messy. Even elegantly mapped and surrounded by cues to explanatory systems meant to make reality graspable, the all-too-human passions of Griffin's mysterious figures remain provocatively incomprehensible.

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