



# Stocked

Contemporary Art from the Grocery Aisles

Ulrich Museum of Art

Wichita State University



# **Stocked**

Contemporary Art from the Grocery Aisles

Emily Stamey

**Ulrich Museum of Art**

Wichita State University

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

**University of Washington Press**

Seattle and London



awry on the shelf, as though bumped out of place by someone reaching for one of the few remaining boxes of Apple Cinnamon Cheerios.

That indication of the passage of time reinforces the activity of holding the box of corn flakes. Hilliard's father studies its front, but turns the package in such a way that it appears he is about to shift his focus to the side where the nutritional content is listed. With his right arm resting on the shelf next to him, he is clearly taking his time to make a decision. Unlike the customary three or four panels that constitute Hilliard's panoramas, this scene is made up of seven. The added width emphasizes both the incessant monotony and yet seemingly infinite variation of the aisle's offerings. In a 2003 review of Hilliard's work, critic Talya Halkin noted aptly that his photographs revolve "around the tension between strength and vulnerability."<sup>39</sup> Albeit clearly in control of his decision-making, the artist's father has a daunting task ahead to sift through the huge

number of available choices and the information on each box.

## Community

That most notoriously animated of the grocery aisles, the cereal section—with its cartoon characters begging children's attention—also appears in the work of Canadian artist Sonny Assu, a Ligwil'xw of the We Wai Kai First Nation, who explores the construction of cultural identities by bringing together popular consumer culture and Northwest Coast native iconography. He raises a host of questions: How do contemporary indigenous populations combat assumptions that they live in the past according to historic, tribal ways? At the same time, how do these people actively sustain their native culture in a contemporary context?

Without providing concrete answers, Assu addresses these questions with a sly sense of humor. His Breakfast Series cereal boxes mock any notion that First Nations children are immune to the



[28] David Hilliard, *His Problem with Plurality*, 1998. C-print (7 panels), 18 × 161 in. overall. Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York



popular desire for sugary treats, or that they must be marketed to differently from other kids [29–33]. At the same time, Assu subversively fills the fine print on his packages with historical facts about indigenous North Americans. In light of a 2006 report prepared for Canada's Assembly of First Nations citing "a movement away from traditional foods to more processed foods" as one cause for the alarming rate of obesity among First Nations children, Assu's imaginary cereal boxes also touch on a very real health concern.<sup>40</sup>

Acknowledgment of food's critical role in cultural identity is also at the heart of Karyn Olivier's artistic intervention *ACA Foods Free Library* [34 a–d]. In March 2010, she stocked the shelves of ACA Foods, a Caribbean grocery store in Hartford, Connecticut, with books from and about the Caribbean. Diane Wolkstein's retelling of the Haitian tale *The Magic Orange Tree* could be found alongside packages of ginger biscuits; Eric Williams's *From Columbus to Castro* was wedged between bottles of Matouk's Hot Sauce; Edgar Mittelholzer's *Shadows Move Among Them* was stacked amid boxes of fish oil tonics. The artist required no card or proof of residency to borrow the books:

Borrowers are only asked to return the book(s) when they are finished digesting them. The hope is for this library to expand what we imagine the "consumables" of a market to be—particularly when that market inadvertently traffics in nostalgia for home. Perhaps it can

be a place where we really slow down, browse, and relish the sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and yes, the imperishable produce of my West-Indian heritage.<sup>41</sup>

Olivier's project speaks to the role grocery stores, especially those at the heart of a distinct community, can play as sites of connection and social exchange.

The deeply felt importance of local grocery stores is demonstrated with particular passion in the video *Store Buyout Day*, part of a larger project titled *Store Buyout: The Art of Convenience* [35 and 36]. On May 20, 2011, five artist friends—Matt Fidler, Jody Gnant, Hal Kirkland, Gary Lachance, and Kyle MacDonald—walked unannounced into Hercules Fancy Grocery at 27½ Morton Street in New York and bought every single item from the small market. Their spending spree was an effort to save the owner, Greek immigrant Hercules Dimitratos, who was behind on his lease and in danger of eviction. In the charming video documentation of their action, the artists stand outside on a rainy street to announce their mission to the viewer, briefly snap open for the camera a briefcase full of money, then march down the street and into the store. When they inform Dimitratos of their intent, he covers his mouth and gasps in disbelief. Then the shopping begins, shown in varying degrees of time-lapse and set to a recording of the Electric Light Orchestra singing their upbeat 1977 hit "Mr. Blue Sky." As the items are rung up, a single receipt unspools from





[34a] Karyn Olivier, *ACA Foods Free Library* (detail), 2010–ongoing. Installation of books in ACA Foods, a Caribbean grocery, Hartford, Connecticut, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist





[34b] Karyn Olivier, *ACA Foods Free Library* (detail), 2010–ongoing. Installation of books in ACA Foods, a Caribbean grocery, Hartford, Connecticut, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist





[34c] Karyn Olivier, *ACA Foods Free Library* (detail), 2010–ongoing. Installation of books in ACA Foods, a Caribbean grocery, Hartford, Connecticut, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist





[34d] Karyn Olivier, *ACA Foods Free Library* (detail), 2010–ongoing. Installation of books in ACA Foods, a Caribbean grocery, Hartford, Connecticut, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist