

## REVIEWS: *Massachusetts*

### JAMES MONTFORD: BLACK INDIANS IN SPACE

Howard Yezerski Gallery • Boston, MA • [howardyezerskigallery.com](http://howardyezerskigallery.com) • February 8–March 12, 2013

In this exhibition of eleven small-scale mixed-media collages in the gallery's back room, James Montford explores African American and Native American stereotypes and identity in works that are at once deeply personal and universal, humorous and wrenching. Montford's techniques are low-tech: He cuts out components and glues them together rather than seamlessly digitally synthesizing, and outputting them. A mash-up of popular culture, mythology, religion, science, and history, the work pops with the tensions of uneasy juxtapositions of racist cartoons, caricatures, and toys.

Montford's African American and Native American heritage affords him an authority to say things through his work that would have a completely different meaning if the work were made by someone of a different racial background.

Familiar images of outer space serve as the backdrop for floating figures in all the works. Montford co-opts derogatory images and then colonizes this space with his hybrid figures. He



James Montford, *The Great Creator*, 2012, mixed-media collage, 11 x 11"

thereby politicizes the very ground of our existence, which it is easy to think of as neutral. In some collages, such as *The Great Creator* a single totemic figure—assembled from the pieces of china figurines, offensive caricatured representations of black faces, and Native American headdresses—unapologetically confronts the

viewer. Other works imply a narrative with multiple figures set against the space, such as *Space Walk* where a male figure with a prominently displayed blue penis in the upper left of the frame eyes a female figure floating in the lower right.

The assembled figures echo not just Native American totems but also the exquisite corpse drawings and collages of the surrealists. The power of this work lies in the way Montford leverages the intimacy of the works' scale and facture to pull the viewer in, compelling us to come closer, but then surprising us with the message when we are close enough to see. The unassuming format and facture of the work make that message all the more powerful. That such small-scale and technically simple work is so powerful calls into question the value of spectacle and excess in much contemporary art. This work is richly subversive evidence of Montford's deeply felt and considered engagement with ideas, which no amount of money or entertainment value can replace. —*Mary Bucci McCoy*