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Roberta Smith, "Arthur Jafa's Profound Meditations on Black America," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2018

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ART REVIEW

Arthur Jafa's Profound Meditations on Black America

By Roberta Smith

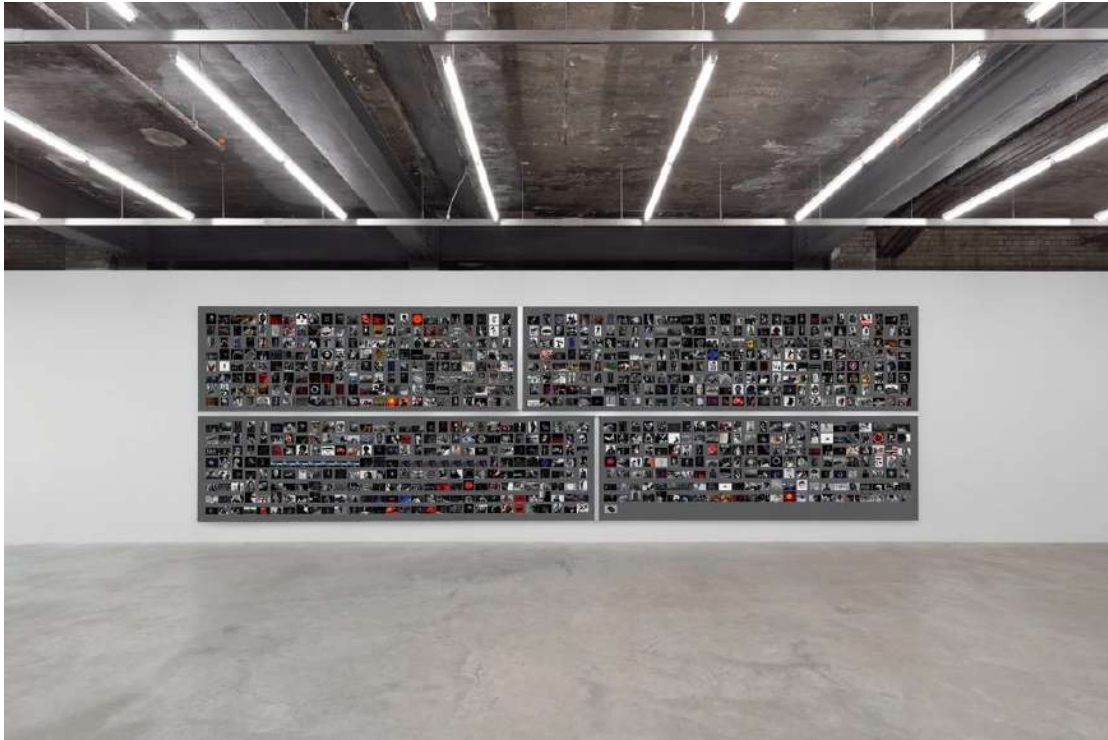


"La Scala," 2018, at Gavin Brown's enterprise in Harlem. The artist Arthur Jafa is at the center of this performance piece, inspired by the story of an 1830s sex worker who was possibly the first known trans woman in the United States. Credit Gavin Brown, New York

Arthur Jafa is back, nearly two years after his indelible New York solo debut at Gavin Brown's enterprise. That show helped introduce the artist, 57, and previously best known as a filmmaker and cinematographer, to the wider art world, and it consisted of one revelatory video made mostly of existing footage. A head-spinning seven-minute compilation of joy, pain and harsh fact, "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death" encompassed the complexities of life for black Americans: the history, the horrors, the cultural achievements, the enduring sense of community. This transformative masterpiece was in many ways an uplifting slap in the face of white America.

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“Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures,” Mr. Jafa’s second show at Gavin Brown, is altogether different — a dense orchestration of artworks, subjects and allusions. (For starters, the show’s title refers to influential musicians of different races and aesthetic genres, combining the title of an album by the free jazz pianist Cecil Taylor with one by the post-punk band Joy Division.) Spread throughout the gallery’s three exhibition floors, 14 works in sculpture, photography and video frequently seem to isolate, one at a time, the various subjects and emotional chords of “Love Is the Message.” We also see more of the artist himself, especially in two large staged photographs that show him in imperious half-drag and revive his earlier involvement with performance.



“Apex,” 2018. Mr. Jafa’s mural-size montage contains 841 found images, which also appear in his eight-minute 2013 film of the same title. Credit Lance Brewer/Gavin Brown, New York

The exhibition begins with one of these photographs, “La Scala,” roughly the size of a full-length portrait of a European monarch. We see Mr. Jafa in a long, sumptuous white skirt, a black leather corset and a flowing dark brown weave. It is inspired by the story of Mary Jones, a pickpocket and sex worker in Manhattan in the 1830s who was possibly the first known trans woman in the United States. (Born Peter Sewally, she became known as the Man-Monster after being tried for robbery.) But Mr. Jafa’s costume and haughty stance also present the artist as a diva — unapologetically black, proud and androgynous. The show’s centerpiece is a new video, “akingdoncomethas” — running 100 minutes and consisting exclusively of footage of black Christian church services from the past few decades.

The show’s three floors function a bit like chapters. After “La Scala,” the first floor concentrates on dark chapters in our history. “Unbalanced Diptych” combines an interwar shame: a wide view of three lynched black men surrounded by a crowd of unabashedly cheerful white faces, with a narrow photograph of about eight young black men, possibly gang members with guns in their hands and black censor bars across their faces, a bizarre detail in this context. On the opposite wall is “Apex,” a mural-size montage of 841 found images, many of them sinister if not horrifying, that appear — rapid fire and accompanied by relentless techno music — in an eight-minute 2013 film of the same name (though it’s not in the show). The final work here is “Geto,” a photograph of Whitney Houston just hours before she died, seen through the rain-speckled windshield of a car and looking slightly distressed.

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“Geto,” from 2018, shows Whitney Houston just hours before she died in 2012. Credit Lance Brewer/Gavin Brown, New York

In comparison, the second-floor gallery feels like a protected zone. It’s the heart of the show. The only artwork here is the ardent, electrifying “akingdoncomethas,” projected onto an enormous wall. The black church was glimpsed only intermittently in “Love Is the Message.” Here it is excavated as a foundation of black American life, a source of solace, musical expression, emotional catharsis and moral rejuvenation. Mr. Jafa seems to want to overwhelm us all, whether we have ever been in a black church or not.

We see megachurches with immense congregations and charismatic preachers and singers for whom singing and speaking often merge, while music slides from gospel to blues to jazz to rock. The first segment shows the Rev. Al Green segueing from the Lord’s Prayer into “Jesus Is Waiting” in a brilliant performance on “Soul Train” in 1974.



Al Green - "Jesus Is Waiting" Credit Video by jamaisledimanche

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Then follows a series of mostly spellbinding figures: the growling, bearlike T.D. Jakes (“the greatest amen you can give the word of God is change”) and the suave Kenneth C. Ulmer, who differentiates between flesh vs. spirit and fact vs. truth, which is a little unsettling in the days of “Fake News.” The singer Le’Andria Johnson appears three times, in different circumstances with a new look — her voice ever astounding. One of the longer segments features the Dallas Fort Worth Mass Choir, 200 strong in yellow and blue robes, led by the explosive Kirk Franklin who can evoke both James Brown and the Joel Grey of “Cabaret.”



CreditGavin Brown, New York



T.D. Jakes, top, and Le’Andria Johnson, above, appear in “akingdoncomethas” (2018), Mr. Jafa’s 100-minute-long video focusing on black worship ceremonies.CreditGavin Brown, New York

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In the final gallery, which is on the double-height fourth floor, the show circles back toward the sinister in a display of four immense truck tires, over seven feet tall, nearly three feet thick and tautly encased in chains. One hangs from a steel gantry as from a gallows. There are precedents for these ready-mades, including in different ways, the work of Cady Noland, the young Jeff Koons and Chakaia Booker. But their scale and density has a beauty and a ferocity that is entirely their own: They are at once tribal, industrial and fetishistically decorated. And they are of a piece with the monumentality and scope of Mr. Jafa's unfolding elucidation of black American life and art.



An installation view of the immense truck tires on the fourth floor of the gallery. The tires are over seven feet tall, and tautly encased in chains. Credit Lawrence Brewer/Gavin Brown, New York