

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Siddhartha Mitter, "Arthur Jafa Taps into the Underground Current of Blackness," *The Village Voice*, May 25, 2018



Arthur Jafa Taps Into the Underground Current of Blackness

"The work is intellectual, and just as much, spiritual. You might say it's got soul."

by SIDDHARTHA MITTER

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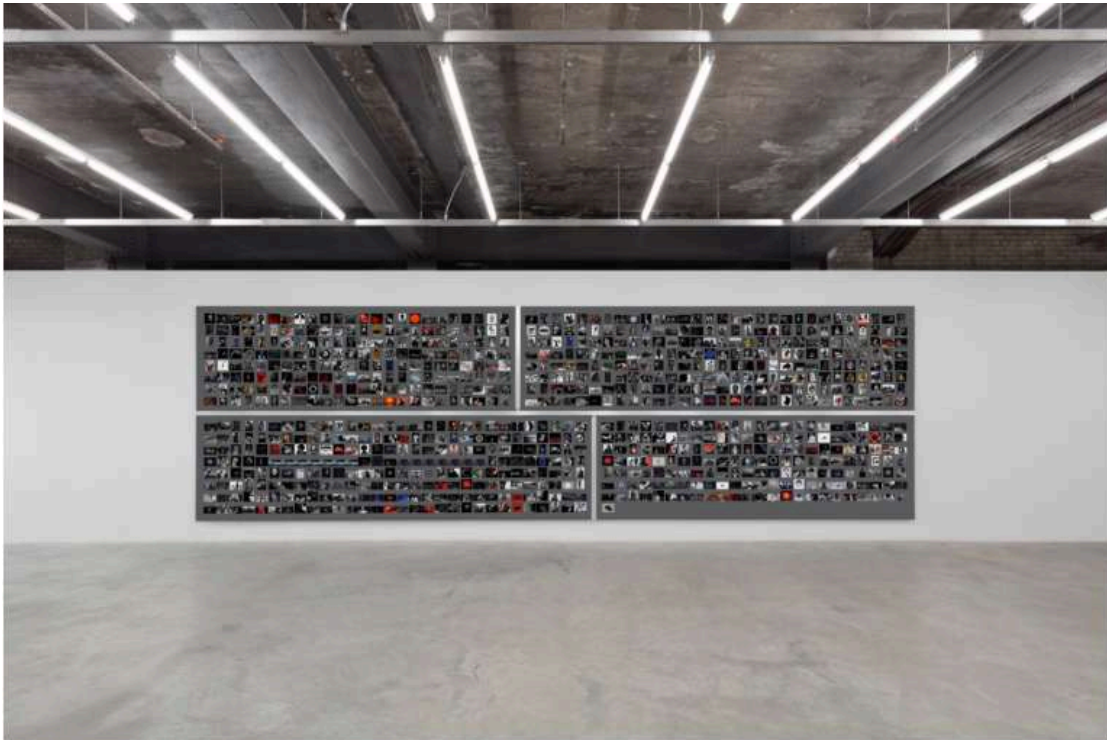
"Man Monster — Duffy" (2018)

COURTESY ARTHUR Jafa AND
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE,
NEW YORK/ROME

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Deep below the convulsive surface of the daily news flows a strong, slow current of Black thought that quietly informs our culture while drawing scant attention to itself. Its writings are often scholarly, its art shown away from the big-ticket venues or unavailable on digital platforms. This current is not involved in insta-reaction to the latest political or cultural outrage; it takes the rise of Trumpism seriously, of course — dead serious — but also in well-worn stride, for it knows too much to be surprised. Its exponents pop up at conferences or gallery talks, but you won't catch them on E! or MSNBC. The work is intellectual, and just as much, spiritual. You might say it's got soul.

What is the work about? It is about Blackness — or, to adopt the distinction that the essayist Greg Tate himself borrows from Raheem Roland Kirk, *Blacknuss* — being and thinking and living Black, under this category that white supremacy invented and its agents relentlessly police; within the community of affect and action thus organized; yet spilling out of the boundaries, as humans will. This is Blackness in the *longue durée*. It admits paradox and contradiction. Its politics are fluid and plural. It is hip to punk rock and Abstract Expressionism just as it is to slave narratives and the Quiet Storm. It is an open, welcoming thinking: The portals are everywhere once you see them — in the art practice of Kara Walker, for instance, or when conceptual filmmaker Kahlil Joseph teams up with Beyoncé to make *Lemonade*, or in the way the analysis and poetics of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, or Christina Sharpe have seeped into experimental art. But it's on you to seek it out, to slow down and pay attention. That is part of the work.



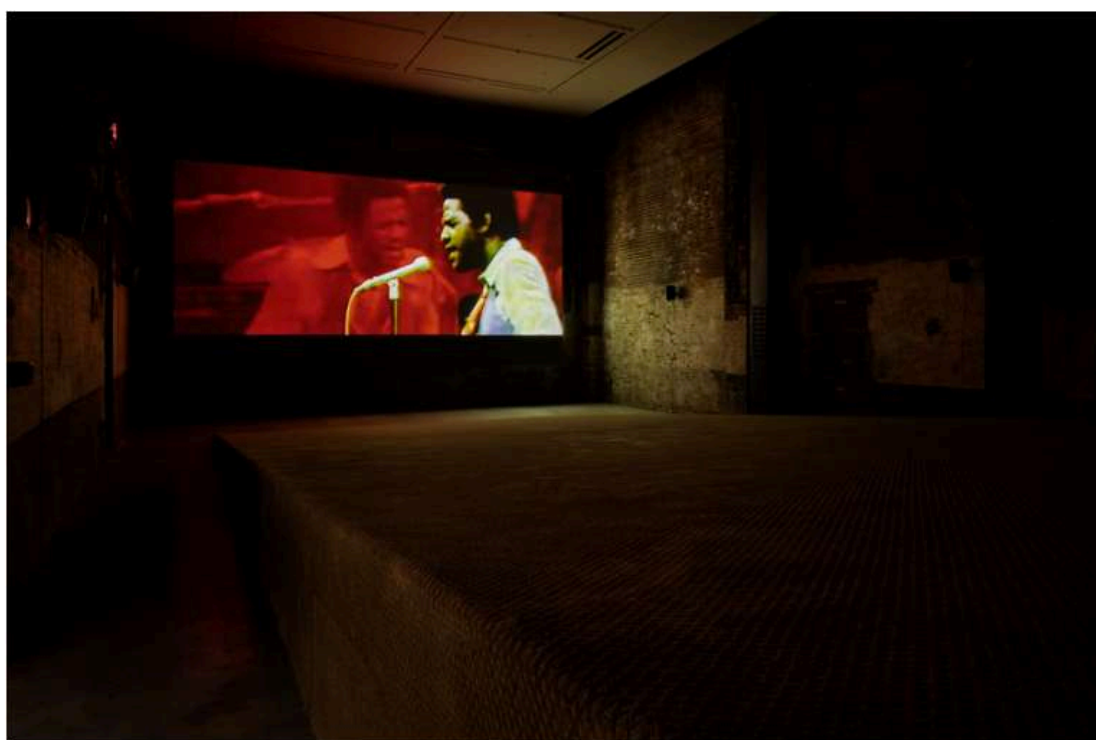
"Apex Grid" (2018)

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE,
NEW YORK/ROME. PHOTO:
LANCE BREWER

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All this makes the generous exhibition by Arthur Jafa now on view at the Harlem flagship of the gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise a particular treat. For a good thirty years Jafa, a filmmaker by original craft, has been a nodal figure in Black thought — known to all as “AJ” — in collaboration and conversation with the likes of Kerry James Marshall, Carrie Mae Weems, bell hooks, and Spike Lee.

But it's only last year that Jafa, who is 57 and based in Los Angeles, drew sustained attention from — let's be frank here — white media, behind *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, a seven-minute collage of footage from newscasts, police cameras, church, hip-hop, nature, that distills Black joy and pain in an emotional kernel scored by the Kanye West song “UltraLight Beam.” A powerful work that landed with heightened urgency right after the 2016 election, *Love* was an art piece: Museums have collected it (it is currently on view at SFMOMA in San Francisco), and you won't find it online. Indeed, much of Jafa's work takes effort to find. This was not always his choice: His breakout as a cinematographer, *Daughters of the Dust*, the 1991 film by Julie Dash, only arrived on streaming platforms last year, despite its critical status as a transformational work in Black American cinema.



Installation view of “akingdoncomethas” (2018)

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE,
NEW YORK/ROME. PHOTO:
LANCE BREWER

The current exhibition is titled *Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures*, a mash-up reference to Cecil Taylor and Joy Division that signals the artist's catholic inspirations. It is an invitation to experience Jafa's work across forms — film, photography, sculptural installation, performance — and,

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for those who met him through *Love*, to understand his method at a molecular level. Here, on the gallery's second floor, is a long film on a wall-sized screen, *akingdoncomethas*, made (mostly) of footage of preaching and music from Black churches, long passages that eventually intercut and intersect, to lyrical effect, with visuals of the recent Southern California wildfires. For one hour on Saturdays, this is replaced by something with the opposite pace and energy: looped screenings of *Apex*, a hyperkinetic short set to a frenetic electronic track. Among the photo-based installations on the ground floor, one decomposes *Apex* film into its component images: whereas in the film they rush through at high speed, here they are mounted on aluminum and lined up—apparently in scattered order—along a grid with their .jpg filenames preserved like thumbnails on a computer desktop. Peruse at leisure the album covers (Marvin Gaye, Grace Jones, Big Black, Pulp), sci-fi stills, historical figures and celebrities (Angela Davis, Michael Vick), cartoons (Mickey Mouse, Jessica Rabbit), weird deep-sea fishes and other organisms, to form your sense of Jafa's system of narrative through montage.



"La Scala" (2018)

COURTESY THE ARTIST
AND GAVIN BROWN'S
ENTERPRISE, NEW
YORK/ROME

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Elsewhere in the show are other methodologies. *Unbalanced Diptych* is just that, a black-and-white juxtaposition in different proportions of an archival image of a lynching in Duluth, Minn., in 1919, with a portrait of young armed men in a Los Angeles gang, with bars that black out their eyes. Two works are staged self-portraits in which Jafa performs as Mary Jones (née Peter Sewally), a Black sex worker and pickpocket in 1836 New York who was found, when arrested, to be wearing an elaborate leather vagina. One image, *La Scala*, finds the subject clothed, while in the other, *Man Monster – Duffy*, Jafa-as-Jones spreads his legs to reveal such an accessory, custom-made for the occasion. Nearby is *Black Bottom*, a black-and-white manipulated from a porno still, beckoning viewers to their own consideration of the politics of the Black pussy.



Installation view of "Big Wheel I" (2018) (background)

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE,
NEW YORK/ROME. PHOTO:
LAWRENCE BREWER

On the gallery's top floor — in a sky-lit warehouse space of cavernous proportions — is something entirely different. Here, Jafa has taken four seven-foot tires — gargantuan things, made for monster trucks by a Colorado manufacturer — and laced each one with a mesh of iron chain; in lieu of hubcaps are abstract medallion sculptures that are 3-D printed from melted chains. These are industrial chakras, sacred shapes from the factory forge. They manifest one of Jafa's obsessions, the culture of monster vehicles that has fascinated him since his Mississippi childhood, but the heavy manufacturing feel also evokes — at least for this viewer — America's economic changes, notably the deindustrialization and transition to the service economy that Jafa's generation watched unfold and that dashed so many Black middle-class aspirations. One stands near the wall, two out on the floor (one of these adorned with blue bandanas, Crip-style), and the fourth hangs by a hook from a

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gantry. The installation has a sound component: a loop of Teddy Pendergrass ballads that emit from floor speakers. The songs drench the room in a valiant but wounded masculinity, seductive and probably toxic, as authentic a product of late-industrial America as are the tires and gantry. It's a spacious, yearning, open-ended work; a big mood.

Gavin Brown's gallery fosters lingering; the building has a kitchen in the ground floor exhibit space, for instance, where you might find water, coffee, snacks, and people passing the time. The laid-back feel suits Jafa's work — particularly the film on the second floor, which runs a hundred minutes and is worth watching in full. A wide, inclined riser in the room allows you to stretch out as you do so, pulling you into the reverential energy. For all the found-footage splicing and art effects that accelerate toward the end, this is very much a work about the Black church, and from the first segment, with Al Green singing "Jesus Is Waiting" in 1974, it's one passage of sacramental maestria after the next, whether it's preaching by Bishop T.D. Jakes, the popular megachurch and television pastor, or praise and worship by the extraordinary singer and pastor Le'Andria Johnson. The film summons up a gamut of existential concerns — faithfulness, redemption, community — but also varying modes of worship, well before it gets to the wildfires, with their shots of animals emerging out of the smoke or night traffic in the Sepulveda Pass between the blazing hills. The hovering Biblical reference is Revelation, but Jafa is a collagist, therefore heterodox; his film sheds rather than accrues the certainties of dogma, as it builds toward an open question, a loud silence.



"My Little Buddha" (2018)

As Miles Davis taught, the silences make the music; without silence, there is no mystery. Jafa has stated the aim of making work on par with what Black music achieves: "Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music," as he told Antwaun Sargent last year in *Interview*. His current show deploys performance and sculpture as added techniques, but consistent with the project. Blackness in America is the stuff of policing and politics, but Black life — *Blacknuss*, if you will — is transcendent, Jafa reminds us. Neither program nor ideology, it holds no absolute but liberation.