

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dean Daderko, "Ill Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry," *Mousse Magazine*, February, 2017

Mousse Magazine

ILL SUNS

ARTHUR Jafa AND SONdra PERRY
IN CONVERSATION WITH DEAN DADERKO

Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry recently mounted astounding and important solo exhibitions in New York. Jafa's searing and prescient short video *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, presented at Gavin Brown's enterprise's new space in Harlem, and Sondra Perry's intense and perversely humorous *Resident Evil* at The Kitchen were both deeply affecting for me on the strength of their shared interests in Blackness and the illuminating ways in which they smartly address the conditions in which Black folks find themselves socially, politically, and physically today. Given the precarious and dangerous situation of people of color—in the United States and further abroad—voices like Jafa's and Perry's shed an urgent and necessary light on what are feeling like increasingly dark times.

Arthur Jafa is an artist born in Tupelo, Mississippi (1960). His latest screenings have been held at ICP, New York; International Center of Photography School, Barnard College, New York, Museum of Contemporary African Diaspora Art, New York. Selected exhibitions include Serpentine Gallery, London (2017); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York (2016).

Sondra Perry (1986, New Jersey) is an interdisciplinary artist whose works in video, computer-based media, and performance explore what Perry calls the "slippages of identity" that define subjective experience in the digital world. Her latest solo show has been held at The Kitchen, New York.

Dean Daderko is curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

ARTHUR Jafa

One of the things that I found really interesting about your show, Sondra, is how you combine formal and political elements. And there's another sense too—the visceral. You introduce a lot of gratifications of the flesh. Yeah, there's techno savvy, and technology and media, but my impression was, "Wow, this is very Vodun, digging peoples' bodies up and reanimating them."

SONdra PERRY

It's really complex. I've been thinking through how to represent different, simultaneous points of view in my work. In my recent video *Resident Evil* (2016), I included Fox News footage where you see lots of people shooting footage on their phones of Gerardo Rivera's live broadcast from Baltimore during the recent uprisings there. And there's a citizen journalist who also uses this footage. Then there's the Fox broadcast itself. I'm sticking these things together to establish a ground where I can think through Black being and also come to terms with just what being is.

AJ

Do you see your work as a body? It's a funny term. Is it a body? Or, what's not a body? What's an un-body of work? Your show is literally a re-assembly. You're putting together something new, like a Frankenstein monster, which introduces a sense of dismemberment.

SP

That's it! I made nonfunctional exercise machines, and animated pictures I took of my skin in a video I projected over an entire wall. I think that the idea of humanness is fundamentally an illusion, and in order to avoid White normativity, I prefer to disassemble my own body. To take my skin, reanimate it into fluid waves, and make exercise machines that have their own artificial intelligence. The machines let you know that if you think you're going to get a workout on them, it's probably not going to happen.

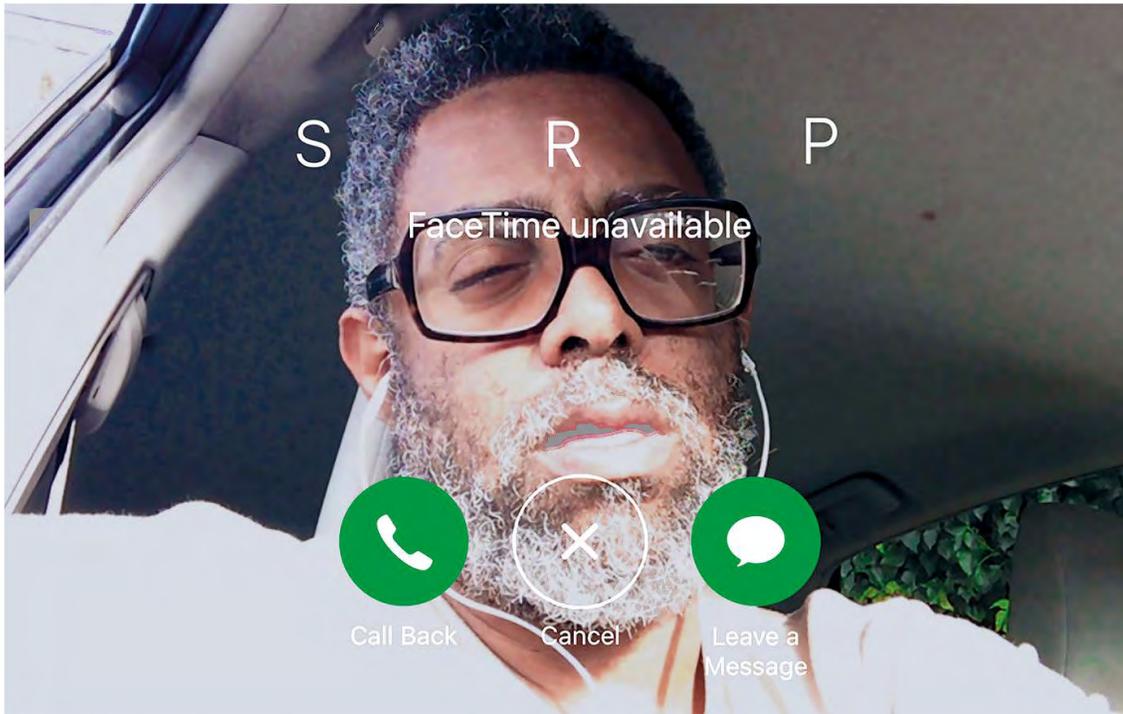
AJ

I met someone in my show at Gavin's who saw my video *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, and talked to me about mobilizing people. He was super charismatic, saying how we've got to take our society back. Even though I'm obsessed with politics, I'm not an activist. There's nothing wrong with it, of course. And maybe it's even the primary mechanism by which things change in society. But it seems to me that artists operate in a different space—one that's unconscious on a certain level, and symbolic. Black Lives Matter didn't exist as a hashtag prior to Obama becoming president. Black people want a Black president, and we get a Black president, so we assume that this person, because he's statistically Black—whatever that means—is going to look out for the interests of Black people. But Black people are still being shot like dogs during the tenure of a Black president. What does that mean? How do you proceed?

GLADSTONE GALLERY

53

ILL SUNS
D. DADERKO



Top - Arthur Jafa, *untitled*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome
Bottom - Sondra Perry, *Young Women Sitting and Standing and Talking and Stuff (No, No, No)*, 2015, performed by Joiiri Minaya, Victoria Udondian, and Ilana Harris-Babou at The Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist

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Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (still), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome

DD Can you talk about appropriation?

AJ I feel two ways about it. I've got a lot of video footage in there, a lot of other peoples' stuff, pulled from the Internet. I talked with attorneys who said it was fair use because I was using small clips. It made me think that "fair use" is not the same as "fair." I see a very problematic relationship with criminality comprising ownership in slavery, right? I've got a problematic relationship between law and property. Yeah, I don't want nobody stealing my shit. At the same time, if ain't nobody stealing your shit, your shit probably don't got no value. I'm like, "Well, it's a good sign," a sign that the thing being pirated has some currency. The more your shit has value, the more it's going to be pirated. We're living in a different time and space where technology and the way people use it has completely outrun any kind of Cartesian model that'd keep things orderly. This is a really anarchic moment. They're trying to figure out, even now, how to clamp down on the Internet. It just refuses to be controlled. My friend John Akomfrah said something in an interview that hit me like a ton of bricks because it was such a crystalline articulation of my fundamental methodology. He talked about putting things in an "affective proximity" to one another. That's about as clear as I've heard it. People say, "Oh you cut your video to Kanye's music," but it was like eighty-five percent cut before I even heard his song. I saw him performing "Ultralight Beam" on *Saturday Night Live* and thought it was amazing, so I downloaded it. I download everything. Anything I like, I download it. I don't even think about it anymore. I also cut out pictures from magazines. It's like, I see something, and want to have it because I may never see it again. It's impulsive. Some people say it's neurotic. Well, my thing is, is it productive?

SP Right!

AJ It's kind of like, how are you trying to effect change? I see myself as an undertaker. I'm trying to grab people and say, look, this is what's going on under the surface of things. Don't look away. It's a natural human response to recoil from something you're disturbed by. It's what people do—they pull back. If it's something really hard to see, they'll run away, or turn the page. I've trained myself to do almost the opposite: if something really disturbs me, I absolutely am going to download it. In hip-hop, it's the same thing: you take a thing and do something with it. You don't make a thing. Yeah, these folks are making things, but not usually from the raw material of notes and tones. Hip-hop takes all these given things, these preset blocks, and treats them in a way they weren't necessarily produced or intended to be treated.

SP That way of inventing a story is part of the reason I started working with my family. I realized that they were really good storytellers. I just think back to being young and listening to the same stories at family events. I'd recognize how those stories would change over the course of ten years or so. It relates to how we move through the world. In one video I recently made with my family I asked them to talk about family histories, but to flip them a little bit, to introduce a tiny bit of fiction. That's what they did the entire weekend we shot.

To make a long story short, their contributions changed the entire work. My grandmother told me a story about burying an American flag in her backyard. She said when my aunt went into the military, she started hanging flags in front of her house. She said she'd been taking them down and burying them in the backyard for twenty years. I thought this was so amazing. A few years ago, my grandmother covered most of her backyard with cement, which would have made the flags inaccessible, though there were still some, she said, in the collard green beds.

DD You included this footage in *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (2015), right?

SP Yes, but that footage was staged. I staged an un-burial because she had the most recent flag under her bed, where she keeps everything: birth certificates, the election of Barack Obama

newspaper, all that stuff. My family told me that since it was winter, she was waiting for the ground to get soft to bury it. So we staged an un-burial. When the video was shown, my mom and all of her sisters came to see it. When the un-burial part came up, I said to her, "This is nuts, I can't believe y'all do this." My mom looked at me and said, "We don't." The piece was already done and I'm thinking, "You did what I asked you to do, but without letting me know!" I thought about it for a second, and then asked myself, "Why are you surprised?" It's a survival instinct to elaborate stories this way, and it's so indicative of how we live. It's what Black people do.

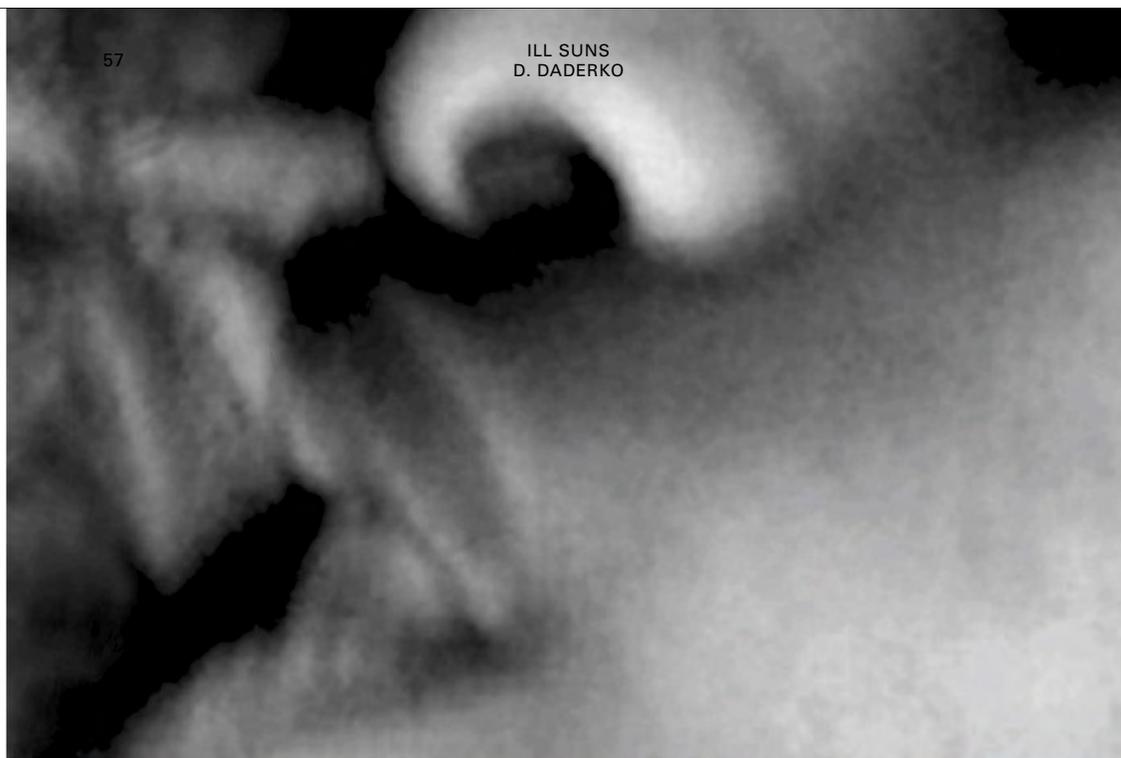


Arthur Jafa, *Monster*, 1988.
Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome

AJ I feel the same way. A Black family is almost like a living readymade. They are readymade. A lot of times people don't quite realize what a resource this can be. Anything you throw at your family, they'll definitely throw it back, and it'll be more complicated when they throw it back at you. It won't be what it's supposed to be. It may not even be true. It may be corrupted. But in terms of how it's corrupted, it can seem even truer.

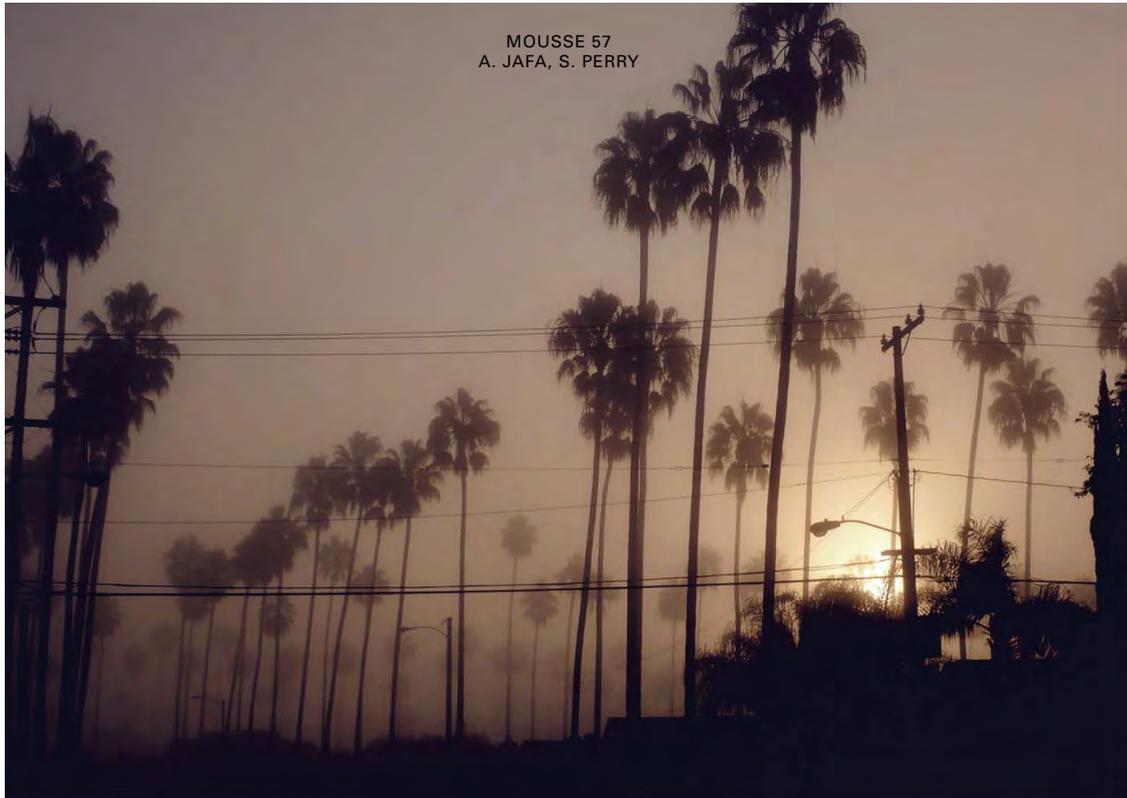
SP Definitely! I'm working on a new piece right now about how my mother's company changed all of their employees' desks to a thing called the Uprise system. It's a mechanized standing-desk system. The company's logo says "Join the Uprising!" These clinical office wellness things use wild trademarks and logos. They seem to say, "You're doing better for yourself, you're a revolutionary, you're standing while you work." She said, "But what you don't realize is that standing while you work makes you really tired." And I said, "That's it exactly!" So we're working on a piece that addresses the politics of uplift in relation to the Uprise system.

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Top - Arthur Jafa, *untitled*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome
Bottom - Arthur Jafa, *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (still image of Hortense Spillers), 2013.
Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome

GLADSTONE GALLERY



MOUSSE 57
A. Jafa, S. PERRY



Above, top and bottom - Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (stills), 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome
Opposite - Sonda Perry, *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*, 2016, *Resident Evil* installation
view at The Kitchen, New York, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella

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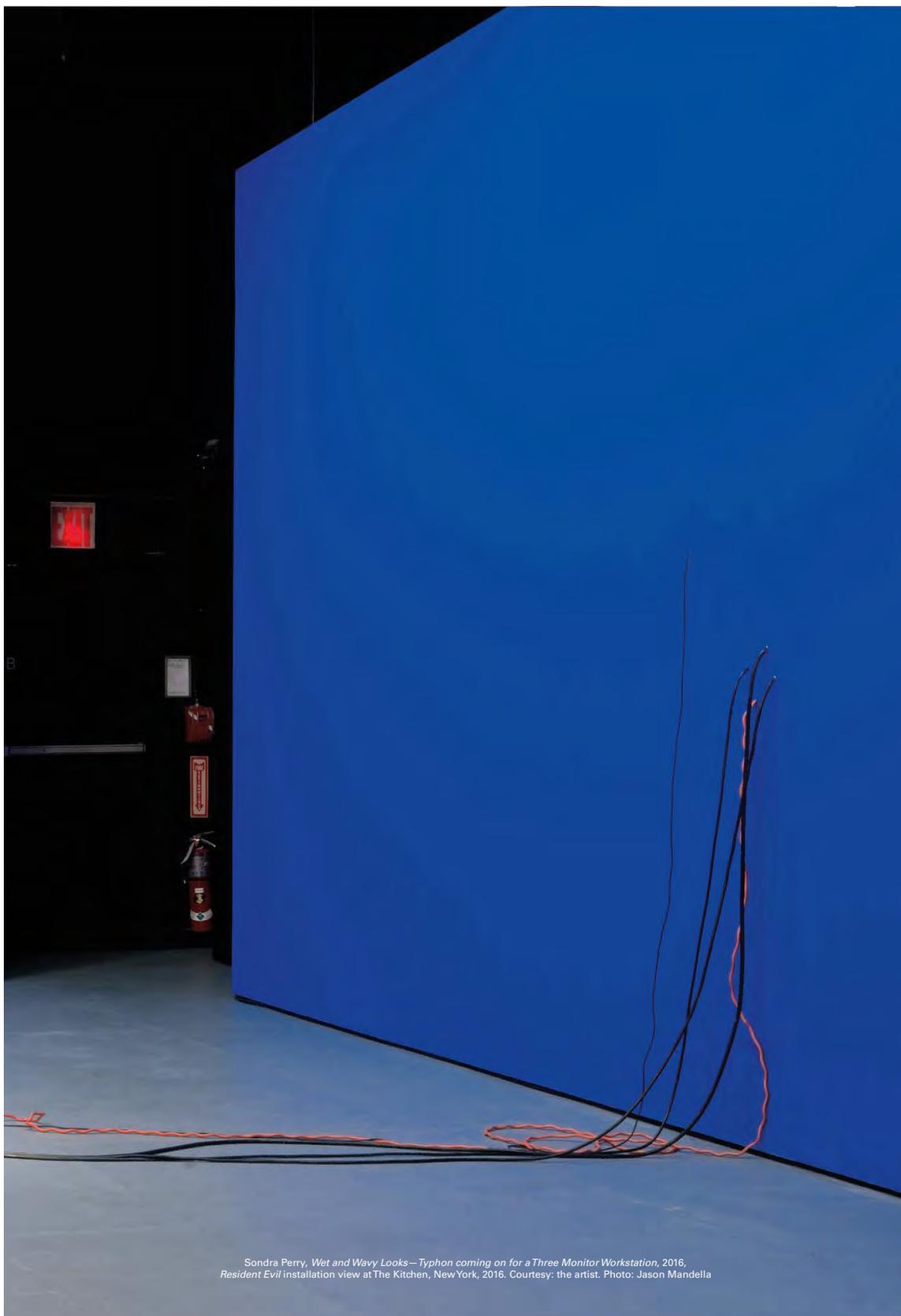
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Sondra Perry, *Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhon coming on for a Three Monitor Workstation*, 2016.
Resident Evil installation view at The Kitchen, New York, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella

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Top - Sondra Perry, *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
Bottom - Arthur Jafa, *Untitled*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome

GLADSTONE GALLERY

63

ILL SUNS
D. DADERKO

As my family and I are working on these things together, I have to keep reminding folks that this is not just a theoretical understanding of how Black people interact—it's always been this way. I think I got a clearer, more historical understanding of this from reading Simone Brown's book *Dark Matters* (2015). She's talking about surveillance generally, and more specifically about seeing or visualizing Black folks through certain types of technologies. Lantern laws¹ were one of the first surveillance technologies in the Western world. In her book Brown opens up a space for thinking more fully about being seen, or not being seen, and how this visibility or lack of it is utilized.

AJ Earlier, I thought you were starting to say something about Black people and technology, and how your work addresses it.

SP That's exactly what I was getting at.

AJ It's as if those two things—Black people and technology—are diametrically opposed. It's so clear that this isn't the case, because why wouldn't Black people not just be interested in technology, but also very close or versed in its various uses? In a certain respect, at some point we *were* the technology. It seems like people always react when they see a Black person with a computer in their hands, like there's something misbegotten about it. Look at Scott Joplin and the player piano, or Jimi Hendrix's guitar: there's never been a moment where we weren't totally preoccupied with technology. And these technologies are the precursors of robotics. It goes back to your idea of things that get used by other people for their own purposes.

SP There's a moment happening. I think what I'm trying to do with my work is really try to sandwich these ideas into a clear understanding of how technologies have always existed within our community. There are a lot of entanglements that are hard to parse. In my work, this becomes apparent in my interest in representing my flesh through digital manipulations. I animate it with a 3-D rendering program called Blender that's open source. You don't have to install it on your computer in order for it to work, which is important to me because I'm such a transient being. I put the program on a zip drive that I can pick up and take somewhere else. It's important to me to have this kind of mobility, conceptually and actually. I'm interested in taking what I have, no matter how traumatic or joyful, and seeing where it goes. This conception is really at the base of the things that I'm making.

AJ On some level, it's kind of like, you can't have a position about a thing if you are a thing. The last twenty years, thirty years of hip-hop has been Black people with samplers, with computer systems. So why does this stuff even linger? Why is it that we're not understood as a technologically engaged class of people? Clearly we're not scared. We'll get in there and say, "Yo, you may have designed this thing to do X, Y and Z, but what it's better at is this."

SP Right!

AJ One of the things I've been continually obsessed with is the movie *Alien* (1979). To me it's no accident that when the alien first pops out of the guy's chest, all the White folks pull back. But Yaphet Kotto grabs a fork, and he's gonna go in on the alien! He's the only one who's pushing forward, right? He's the one saying, "I recognize, I know what the fuck this is. Let's kill it and let's kill it now!" He recognizes the danger immediately.

In a sense, he's seeing himself. He knows what the danger is. Everybody else is like, "gasp," but he wants to take this thing out. And the alien even has fronts², you know? It's like some total hip-hop shit. And I am obsessed that they got this seven-foot-two Sudanese brother, Bolaji Badejo, to play the alien. Black people can't even get work in movies when they want to. So they go to London and find a seven-foot-two Sudanese guy? This is not an accident. You can't tell me it's arbitrary. Somebody, unconsciously or otherwise, searched him out because on some fundamental psychoanalytic level, they knew the alien was a nigga, excuse my

language. For real, they straight-up knew this on some profound level.

DD Yes, and come to find out that the guy who saves the alien is actually a human-looking robot who works for the corporation!

AJ Exactly! Because the robot is how the corporation implements its power. Every time something comes up, Yaphet Kotto has the most radically pragmatic solution. He's like, "Fuck all this shit, let's nuke the planet from outer space, get the fuck out of here, and deal with the legal ramifications later!"

SP Later!

AJ Everybody else is getting into discussions about science and exploration, he's like, "No!" It's him and the working-class [White] dude, Harry Dean Stanton, who voice their opposition.

SP Yup!

AP It really ends up affirming how—I always like to say, we're ill suns, it's a term I have now. I say, "Ill suns, we're ill suns," meaning we're suns that shine, but we shine in this way that's off. We are also the illegitimate sons and daughters of the West, meaning we're in it, we're absolutely products of it, but because of the way W. E. B. DuBois's dual consciousness thing works out, we look at this stuff from both inside and out. Like, you go to see a cowboy Western, and you're in this weird complicated between-space: you're either fine with the cowboys or with the Indians. It's constantly fluctuating back and forth. I think there's something about this fluctuation is so emblematic of what Blackness is.

1. Eighteenth-century laws in New York that required black, mixed-race, and indigenous enslaved people to carry lit candle lanterns with them if they were walking in the city after sunset, unaccompanied by a White person; lantern laws are seen as the precursors to today's stop-and-frisk policing policies.

2. Decorative tooth covers made of gold, silver, or other precious metals.