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Filmmaker Arthur Jafa makes his Hirshhorn debut with a stunning video installation

Arthur Jafa's 7-minute video installation "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death" is part of the Hirshhorn's exhibition "The Message: New Media Works." (Courtesy of Arthur Jafa and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/ Rome)

"It's been better than a good year."

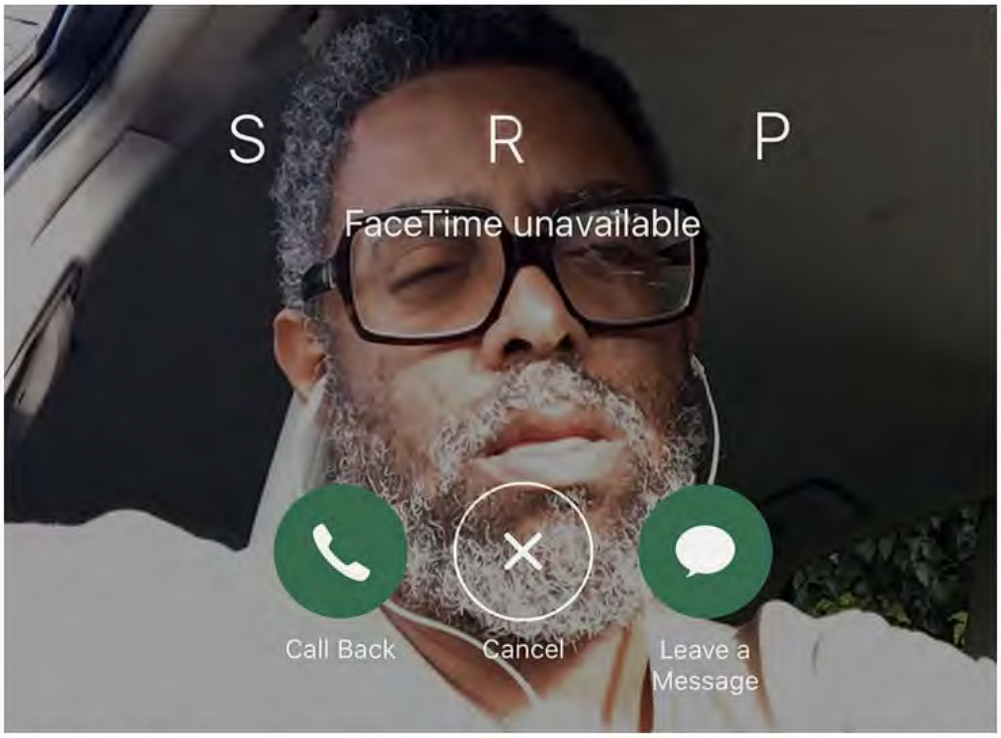
The cinematographer Arthur Jafa is speaking on the phone from Los Angeles, where he lives within spitting distance of the movie industry he holds at ambivalent arm's length, despite being one of its most revered practitioners, at least among aficionados. Jafa, who is in his mid-50s, is best known for

collaborating with the director Julie Dash to achieve the gauzy, lyrical look of her 1991 classic, “Daughters of the Dust,” and, a few years later, shooting Spike Lee’s “Crooklyn” with a nostalgic palette of burnished earth tones inspired by the sun-faded Jet magazines of his youth. The man friends and insiders know as “A.J.” has come to recent prominence shooting music videos for Solange Knowles, Jay-Z and Beyoncé, who paid homage to his work with Dash in her visual album “Lemonade.”

But those gigs haven’t made this “better than a good year” for Jafa. Rather, it’s that his work has been discovered and embraced in the fine-art world he’s been alternately approaching and avoiding for almost 20 years.

In November 2016, his seven-minute video installation “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death” opened at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York, receiving a warm welcome that culminated in a rapturous review in the New Yorker. That was followed by a solo show at London’s Serpentine Sackler Gallery and the inclusion of his 2013 piece “Apex” at Art Basel in June. “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death” opens Saturday for a five-month run at the Hirshhorn Museum as part of the exhibition “The Message: New Media Works.”

Although Jafa is from Mississippi, his first museum show in Washington represents something of a homecoming: An alumnus of Howard University, he’s part of a generation of influential cinematographers to have emerged from the school’s film program, from Ernest Dickerson and Malik Sayeed to Bradford Young. But just as he underplays his role in the films and videos he has made for others (“I worked with filmmakers who had a vision and I shot it”), he demurs when asked if his D.C. museum debut holds special meaning. “The Hirshhorn is cool, but I wouldn’t say that,” he says softly. “At this point it’s just in a string of things.”



Arthur Jafa in a film still from "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." (Courtesy of Arthur Jafa and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/ Rome)

That string starts decades ago, when Jafa began to explore the idea of black cinema as a vernacular all its own, one focused on African American people whose images have historically been erased, distorted, demonized or ignored by a medium that, as Jafa puts it, hasn't evolved to address their expressive needs. Inspired by the experimental work of his mentor Haile Gerima and L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Ben Caldwell, as well as the literary theorist Stephen Henderson and friends like the painter Kerry James Marshall, Jafa has sought to create an idiom that would capture and convey the unique experience of being black in America in the 20th and 21st centuries — a form that would be more indebted to what Jafa has called the "power, beauty and alienation" of black music than to Hollywood conventions. ("Like, what's the cinematic equivalent of Cecil Taylor or Jimi Hendrix or James Brown?" Jafa explained to me in an earlier conversation.)

[Howard University has become incubator for cinematographers]

In “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” it’s clear that Jafa is onto something. Viewers are barraged with a rapid-fire collage of found-footage images that project pain, joy, brutal injustice, virtuosity, deep pleasure, profound grief and bracing resilience — all set to Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam.” Mining clips from silent films, Barack Obama speeches, news footage of police shootings, home movies, concerts and basketball games, and presenting them in an almost dreamlike flurry of associative edits, Jafa creates a portrait brimming with life, trauma, oppression, resistance and survival. Despite its brief running time, the piece feels like a deep, textured, comprehensive summation of Jafa’s chief project all these years — less a manifesto than a “proof of concept,” as he puts it.

“I think so much of the black experience has been, not just being the repository of [W.E.B.] Dubois’s double consciousness, but being the purveyors or beneficiaries of a kind of forced duality,” Jafa observes. “We were chained together on the slave ships, [but that’s also] fellowship and congregation. It’s the same thing with group performance versus solo improvisation in jazz. [It’s] that tense duality: pleasure and pain, celebration and despair, which are all very human, but also particular to black people’s existential circumstances in the West.”

Although viewers may be tempted to interpret “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death” in “sociopolitical” terms, Jafa adds, he hopes that upon reflection, the agony and ecstasy represented in the work can be appreciated as part of a lineage that includes such artists as the Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini and the pre-Renaissance painter Cimabue. “I want to make work with black figures that’s as cerebral and intellectual as anything else,” he says, noting that he resists the notion that only white subjects can be universal. As an African American artist, he says, “I don’t want to vacate my specificity from the things I’m interested in, in order for it to be embraced.”

So far, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death” has been embraced, by black and white audiences alike. Whereas in the past, Jafa had been wary of the art world (“Once I got it into my mind that I was making s--- for rich white people to put on their walls, it just shut my practice down”), he’s encouraged by the degree to which audiences have accepted and understood his work.

“I’m surprised by how many white folks have been moved by it, frankly,” he says. “I’ve been quite pleasantly surprised by how many people have been moved by it. As human beings they’re moved by it. So in one sense it’s working, in terms of the aspirations I’ve had for black music being the proper model for black cinema, where we can be ourselves unconstrained, and other folks can be moved by it. I think there’s a model there.”