

Steven Zultanski, "Surging Tides," *Spike Art Magazine*, Spring, 2021

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Surging Tides

ARTHUR JAJA
"MAGNUMB"
LOUISIANA MUSEUM OF ART
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Arthur Jafa (*1960) has a compelling life story that gets trotted out repeatedly in profiles and reviews (including this one). After spending years as an accomplished cinematographer, notably working on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, 1991, Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*, 1994, and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, 1999, Jafa started showing his own art in the late 90s, only to drop out of the art world a few years later. Then in 2016, his video *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, screened at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, and he quickly found himself at the centre of critical attention and with the resources to finally realise his ideas.

It's a great story, but focusing too much on Jafa's biography risks adding a note of triumph to a body of work that insists on the unreconciled history of anti-Black racism in the US, as if the provocations of the work could be softened by Jafa's newfound success in the art world. There's no hint of resolution in the art itself – it's committed to evocative discordance.

"Magnumb", at the Louisiana Museum right outside of Copenhagen is Jafa's biggest show yet, and he takes the opportunity to intensify the contradictions in his work. It's a large, multifarious exhibition that brings together much of what he's done in an extraordinary burst of activity since 2016, along with new sculptures, new photos, a new installation, and a new video. Though he's become known for his videos of found footage, "Magnumb" restlessly moves between mediums, refusing to be boxed-in. The wall-mounted sculptures of steel rails and chains evoke industrial

machinery, incarceration, and BDSM, while remaining fundamentally abstract. They look like they could have been made by a completely different artist than the one who composed diptychs of found photos in visual rhymes (such as *Bloods I*, 2020, which features Robert Johnson and Miles Davis each holding cigarettes in their mouths at the same angle).

This multiplicity of style is also inherent to the well-known video pieces. His two most celebrated works, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) and *The White Album* (2018) arrange found footage, much of it gathered from YouTube, into intense montages in which there's no dip of energy, no break from the vacillation between beauty and horror. *Love is the Message* juxtaposes footage of Black cultural icons, police brutality, dancing, home videos, and viral videos. *The White Album*, as its title implies, gathers images of white people and white culture, and also draws heavily from videos found on YouTube.

The violent footage is hard to watch, even if one has already seen it repeatedly on social media, and the footage that's rousing likewise remains potent even though it's familiar. Similarly, some of the viral videos that are interspersed throughout *The White Album* are funny, and they uncomfortably retain their power to provoke laughter even in the context of the documentary material (one of the ways that the predominantly white art world sidelines Black artists is by framing their work as if it was devoid of humour and irony, so it's important to note that Jafa's sense of comic timing throws a wrench into easy interpretations of his works as acts of witness).

Not all of the clips in *Love is the Message* and *The White Album* are immediately identifiable, but by relying heavily on widely-disseminated footage, Jafa refrains from uncovering or revealing anything – there's nothing hidden about racism in the US, just as there's nothing hidden about Black cultural achievement. Jafa's work is anti-illusionistic in its

steadfast attention both to harsh social reality and to the inventiveness of Black music and art, but it's also anti-revelatory, disinterested in educating its audience or justifying its existence in digestible pedagogical terms.

That said, the work is also not deliberately obscure, and Jafa generously includes images and footage of artists and thinkers that he admires, and whose work resonates with his own. "Large Array" (2020), a set of thirteen aluminium cut-outs with colour prints of figures important to Jafa's personal mythology (Miles Davis, Adrian Piper, Cady Noland, the black sheep from the cover of Funkadelic's *Greatest Hits*, the Incredible Hulk) function like an inverse key to the show: instead of providing answers, it points outwards to the world, nudging the audience to go check out the work of other artists.

In one instance, other artists take centre stage. *akingdoncomethas* (2018), a two-hour montage of gospel songs and sermons from Black churches, depicts fervent belief without contextualising or explaining it away. Incredible vocal performances are at the centre of most of the footage, but equally important are the crowd reaction shots that show audience members listening intently or being moved. Art audiences encountering Jafa's video in a museum may also be moved by what they see and hear, but it's abundantly clear that these two forms of being moved are fundamentally distinct. They're likely separated by a gulf of belief.

Perhaps the highlight of "Magnumb" is a new video work, *Aghdra* (2020) which departs dramatically from the previous videos. Made entirely with CGI, the forty-minute video depicts a sea of black rocks undulating gently with the waves, occasionally swelling high enough to block out the sun on the horizon. Both cyclical and interruptive, *Aghdra* evokes a contradictory sense of weight – the rocks appear dense, heavy, always about to sink. But they're kept aloft by an impossible, paradoxical buoyancy.

Steven Zultanski

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Photo: Anders Sane Berg, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



Installation view *Large Array*, 2020, dimension variable, Wallpaper and thirteen separate cut-outs, colour print on Dibond, steel plate stands

Photo courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



Installation view of *Agbdra*, 2020, 60 min., CGI rendered video, colour, sound

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