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Siddhartha Mitter, "At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2021

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At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble

With a survey in Europe and stark new sculptures in New York, he is bringing to the fore darker, more personal themes. "I'm an undertaker," he said. "I don't do the uplift thing."



"One of my complaints has been that I've gotten very little pushback," Arthur Jafa said. He welcomes the success after years of career frustration; until recently, he said, "I was a failure, by and large, in my own mind." Credit...Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

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In 2019, Arthur Jafa won the Golden Lion award for best artist in the Venice Biennale for “The White Album.” A collage of found and original video, it mapped the psychology of Black-white relations in America today — the brutality, awkwardness and sometimes care. “Just as the film critiques a moment fraught with violence, in tenderly portraying the artist’s friends and family, it also speaks to our capacity for love,” the jury concluded.

Jafa was at his hotel, packing to leave town, when the news arrived. What surprised him was not that he had won, he told me recently; it was that the prize existed.

“I didn’t know there was an Academy Awards to the art thing,” he said.



Images from Arthur Jafa’s award-winning video, “The White Album” (2018). Credit...Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



“The White Album” mapped Black-white relations in a work with appropriated and original footage, and equal parts essay, poem, and portrait. Credit...Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Jafa was a creature of film, grizzled from 30 years working mostly as a cinematographer for other people, dating to “Daughters of the Dust,” in 1991, by Julie Dash, his spouse at the time. (Though the film made his reputation, with its poetic images depicting the Gullah community off South Carolina early last century, it did not make for a Hollywood career.)

He’s no longer the art ingénue. This season, Jafa (pronounced Jay-fa) has his first retrospective, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, in Denmark, which gathers his video works since 2013, along with his sculpture, photography and binders of inspirational images going back to 1990. And he is showing new sculpture — chilly, brooding objects that give little away — at Gladstone Gallery’s Upper East Side branch in Manhattan.

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Installation view of “Large Array” (2020) in “Arthur Jafa —MAGNUMB,” at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. It brings together 13 separate cutouts — images made and collected by the artist over the years. Credit...Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; Anders Sune Berg

And then there is “Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death,” the seven-minute video poem that became the talismanic artwork of the Black Lives Matter era, particularly since the murder of George Floyd. Jafa’s cathartic treatment of race, violence and the miracle of Black culture, made in 2016, has been called the decade’s most “spellbinding” and “powerful” artwork; currently it stars in “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” the New Museum exhibition with a canonical energy.

And last June, when 13 museums — seven in the United States, six in Europe — wanted to show a single work on all their websites that, in their view, addressed the moment of mass protest against racism and police violence, it was “Love Is the Message” that they presented in a 48-hour-straight free screening.

Now, however, Jafa is complicating his story — subsuming “Love Is the Message” into his entire body of work in the retrospective in Europe, and presenting sculpture in New York that is as tight and hermetic as the video was kinetic and loud. In so doing, he is bringing to the front darker, more personal themes — control, abjection, death — that elude social-justice framings and that have concerned him all along.

“I’m an undertaker,” he told me. “I don’t do the uplift thing.”

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Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



“Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” was screened simultaneously in 13 museums, leaving Jafa wary. But he welcomed its reach. “I took it as an opportunity, because I never felt like Black people had a chance to see ‘Love Is the Message.’” Credit...Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

We met on a Saturday at the Gladstone Gallery. Jafa is 60, a father and grandfather, with a suave, salt-and-pepper look. Friends and colleagues universally call him “A.J.” He had just arrived from Los Angeles, where he lives, but he readily settled into a long, meandering conversation.

The value of the multi-museum online screening, he told me, was its reach. “I took it as an opportunity, because I never felt like Black people had a chance to see ‘Love Is the Message.’”

Still, he said, the work’s prominence — of which he was already wary, once noting that it seemed to bring white viewers a “microwave epiphany” — had grown limiting. “It’s something I’m proud of; it certainly changed my life,” he said. “But I’m a little embarrassed when it pops up again. I joke that it’s my ‘Purple Rain.’”

Jafa’s new sculptures will prompt no campfire rhapsodies. They are made of black industrial pipe and rail, vaguely softened by bits of cloth and ornaments. Some include a dark material he called “high-tech garbage bag.”

The pieces fairly seethe on their wall mounts. “They’re all pretty stark,” he agreed.

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Installation view of "Arthur Jafa," at Gladstone 64 with one of his new sculptures, made from metal pipe. Credit... Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Gavin Brown, Jafa's gallerist and now a partner at Gladstone, said the artist had hinted at this work, inchoately. "He's been worrying these things a long time," Brown said. "They're fetish objects, in a really dark mood."

What links Jafa's art across mediums is the idea that items brought out of context and juxtaposed, whether metal pipes or appropriated YouTube clips, can develop expressive power beyond their original employ. It is precision work — obsessive micro-editing goes into the videos — that draws on a forager's instinct for finding beauty in the ephemeral and mundane.

It invokes, as well, a particularly Black tradition — shaped by economic scarcity — of making art that transforms what is available. That impulse in Black creativity, in Jafa's view, was a way to stake a claim in a largely hostile world. "It's a form of radical determinacy in the face of the chaotic," he said.

It connects, for instance, the craft of the D.J. — an analogy he offers for his video work — with the yard sculptures he saw in Mississippi, where he grew up between Tupelo in the hills and Clarksdale in the Delta, and where "people just felt compelled to make" things.

"A commitment in A.J.'s work is the emphatic acknowledgment of the creative genius of regular Black people," said Thomas J. Lax, curator of media and

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performance at the Museum of Modern Art. “Found material is a way of seeing what is genius about the way people use discarded matter, or in a gesture, how they walk down the street.”



“Valencia” (2021). The sculpture, made from metal rail, steel pipe, plastic pipe, black fabric, fur and bag, is part of a stark new body of work with a contained, potential violence implied. Credit...Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

Jafa’s sculptures, in that spirit, are mostly ready-mades — manufactured items given new context. Their lineage, Jafa said, dates beyond Marcel Duchamp to the African sub-Saharan masks and statues that, though alienated from their spiritual context, destabilized Western aesthetics and opened the road to Modernism.

In 2018, at Brown’s gallery, Jafa introduced his “Big Wheel” series — imposing seven-foot tires swathed in chains, one hanging from a gantry. From large speakers, Teddy Pendergrass ballads filled the space. Jafa told me he considers that installation his most successful. (It reappeared as part of his Venice entry).

I offered my reading of “Big Wheel,” which had mesmerized me — raising themes, I thought, of labor, manufacturing decline, and the slippage between seductive and toxic masculinity. Sure, Jafa answered, but I had missed a significant reference: the circumstances of the car accident that paralyzed Pendergrass at the height of his career, and in which his passenger, it was later learned, was a transgender sex worker.

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Jafa had chosen the music on instinct, he told me, but then realized that his selection subconsciously drew on a body of discourse particular to Black America. “The Teddy thing is Black common knowledge,” he said. “This is why I say I’m not addressing white people in my work; I’m addressing Black folks, but everyone gets to listen in.”



“Big Wheel II,” (2018). Chains, rim, hubcap, tire and fabric from his survey at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. The complete version features Teddy Pendergrass ballads playing in the room. Credit... Arthur Jafa and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

For years, Jafa’s work has doubled as a kind of symposium, convening influential scholars in Black critical studies — among them Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten. They appear in his films (notably his 2014 documentary “Dreams Are Colder Than Death”), exchange with him in public talks, are his friends. The circle extends to fellow artists and filmmakers with whom he readily collaborates.

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“The conversation and vibrancy of exchange are really formative of A.J.’s work,” said Leigh Raiford, an associate professor of African American studies at the University of California at Berkeley. “It’s the liveness, the improvisation of working out ideas in community that make the work so exciting, and resonate with so many.”

A core concern of Jafa and his interlocutors is Black subjectivity as shaped by the trauma of enslavement and its long aftermath. Jafa is adamant that the disaster that set forth Black American existence is also foundational to Black creative genius, and thus warrants unflinching examination. “I think we have an ethical imperative to mine the catastrophe,” he said.

But Jared Sexton, a professor of African American studies and film studies at the University of California, Irvine, who contributed to the retrospective catalog, said Jafa’s work equally “reveals the questioning that is always at the heart of Blackness.” Sexton added, “Blackness is like a productive enigma that yields the most necessary insights, so long as you never try to formalize them into a doctrine or dogma.”



A core concern of the artist is how enslavement and its aftermath have shaped Black American creative genius. That history warrants unflinching examination. “We have an ethical imperative to mine the catastrophe,” he said. Credit...Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

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What Jafa shows can disturb. His video sequences can move from the cosmic and transcendent — solar flares, ocean waves, gospel choirs — to the brutal and traumatic, including lynchings; killings by the police (like that of Walter Scott, in 2015, in “Love Is the Message”); surveillance footage of the murderer Dylann Roof entering Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. (in “The White Album”).

Jafa’s sculpture from 2017, “Ex-Slave Gordon,” is a plastic impression of an 1863 photograph of an escaped slave, seen from behind, back violently scarred from whipping — but with a pose, hand on hip, that Jafa reads as dignified, cool. That image has fascinated Jafa since he was a teenager, he said. He has made it the cover of the retrospective’s catalog — impossible to avoid.

One gets the sense that Jafa, in his moment of triumph, is looking for trouble.

“One of my complaints has been that I’ve gotten very little pushback,” he said. “Including ‘Love Is the Message,’ which, you know, traffics in violence directed at Black bodies.”

Last year, over Zoom, he sparred with an elusive artist named Faith Icecold, who had excoriated him from a now-defunct Instagram account. Their conversation, in which Icecold calls Jafa anti-Black for his choices of imagery and his association with mainstream museums, is included in the catalog. Yet the criticism did not really move Jafa. “I’m insecure about certain things, but I know I’m not anti-Black,” he told me.

Today, Jafa is riding high. “It’s been a victory lap, basically,” he said. In addition to his art exhibitions, his film production company, Sunhaus, has several commercial features in development. He welcomes the success after years of career frustration; until recently, he said, “I was a failure, by and large, in my own mind.”

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Installation view of Jafa's new video, "AGHDRA," in the retrospective in Denmark, without found footage, moves the artist in a new direction. It is entirely computer-generated; its motif is oceanic. Credit...Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; Anders Sune Berg

Yet his newest art projects stand in sharp contrast to "Love Is the Message" — at once more personal and harder to read. One pull is abstraction: His newest video, "AGHDRA," on view in the retrospective, is entirely computer-generated; its motif is oceanic, with waves that swell yet seem made of fragments, like lava.

Another undercurrent in his work that receives less attention is the pull toward themes of sexual control and transgression, desire and degradation — sometimes involving himself. In 2018, for instance, he showed "La Scala" and "Man Monster — Duffy," photographic self-portraits where he plays Mary Jones, an 1830s Black trans sex worker, wearing a corset and, in one, a leather vagina.

This year, also at Gladstone, he curated a show of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs that included plenty of explicit imagery. And his new gallery show, where the metal sculptures give off a distinct dungeon energy, also includes several photographs of his own — one frankly sexual, showing a flaccid penis, owner unidentified.

When I asked Jafa about this direction, he answered in two stages.

First, he said, it stemmed from a rebellious impulse. "It's intransigent, punk, nihilistic, depressive, Gothic."

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Then he followed the thought to a heavier place.

“Power relations and sexuality, for Black folks — these things always enter and are permeable with each other,” he said. He collapsed the history of coerced miscegenation going back to the plantation into a raw metaphor. “I can’t look at my face without seeing my rapist in the mirror. I don’t look like those Africans who came here.”

But Lax, the MoMA curator, said sexual pluralism in Jafa’s work also represents a connection with his creative community; he has collaborated, for example, with the trans artist Tourmaline. “It’s about bringing himself into the room in a meaningful way, but not centering his own desires or identity,” Lax said.

Read this way, it’s a validation of everyone’s freedom. Jafa put it succinctly: “There’s an infinite number of positions to occupy.”

Jafa identifies the source of his unruly streak back in his Mississippi childhood, where, he said, the church was the institution that gathered and protected the community. But it was also hierarchical and it enforced conformity. The dark, disapproved, material was expressed elsewhere, in the blues.

The people who sang the blues, he said, were prone to “despair, longing and heartbreak.” Yet in embracing the torment, they found tools to forge a kind of autonomy.

He has always recognized himself in that disposition. “I’m interested in fundamental change,” he said. “And I think fundamental change happens in the mud.”

Arthur Jafa: MAGNUMB

Through Oct. 21 at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark. louisiana.dk/en

Arthur Jafa

Through June 18 at Gladstone 64, 130 East 64th Street, Manhattan. 212-753-2200, gladstonegallery.com