

Cheyenne Julien at Smart Objects

September 15–
October 20, 2017

I found a cache of those Margaret Keane sad-eyed children paintings in a thrift store in North Carolina once. Possibly on velvet. There were around four, each depicting some woeful street scene usually involving puddles, rain, the back side of city buildings, and downtrodden kids. The children all had that disorienting, exaggerated look in their eyes. Of course, these could've been knock-offs, some of the many floating around the kitschy corners of America.

Many of Cheyenne Julien's paintings at Smart Objects operate in a similar vein of kitsch and pathos—eyes and lips ballooning and rueful, set in spare, intimate, often claustrophobic interior scenes. Julien works in a color palette equal parts gaudy and traumatic—her figures in *Summer Camp*, *Monica*, and *Bath Time* (all works 2017) often have skin that appears bruised or irritated. The grinning, disoriented-looking central figure in *Waterfalling* might be passed out, dead, or simply dead drunk.

Back Ache invokes the same compositional foreshortening and achy swoon of Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1480). Julien's painting replaces the supine Christ with a disfigured cartoon. Long, thick tendrils of black

hair splay out over the figure's shoulders; two hands at the edge of the frame hold a few melting ice cubes. The same space in Mantegna's painting is occupied with the faces and hands of tearful mourners. Julien's hands suggest the action of caretaking, narrativizing a dignity afforded one in pain, even as it is grotesque.

Summer Camp pictures a young woman in a staged, "casual" portrait pose. She looks over her shoulder and out beyond the frame with a furrowed brow, somewhere between weary and wandering. Her shirt, bright orange, reveals her nipples, and her lips are large and ice blue. The painting hangs on a section of wall that has been replaced with vertically arranged gray bricks, their institutional façade swallowing up the splash of nature—a few green pine trees—that we see in the painting over the figure's shoulder.

Everywhere throughout the exhibition is this tension between sparse, harsh environs and vibrant, garishly colored figures—the spirit splashed amongst a dryly inert environment. In the press release, Julien writes about environmental racism and the experience of growing up in the Bronx in one of the Brutalist high-rise apartment complexes so common in mid-century housing projects. In the absence of great or even moderate swaths of nature, young Julien was left with sidewalks, city streets, and the minimal interiors that lived experience revealed to be more prison-like than the

architect and planner cared to anticipate.

Julien's longing for the organic finds a recurrent motif in flowers, whether the spindly, scrappy few in *Picking Flowers* and *Monica*, or the fake *Glass Flowers* sitting starkly at a window sill. Water is another repeated theme, connecting *Back Ache*'s melting ice cubes to *Bath Time* and *Waterfalling*'s liquidity. Each motif underscores a persistent pathos to the exhibition—flowers as both everyday beauty and funereal comfort, water as a teary-eyed dam about to burst. Julien's figures seem caught in the thin film separating dreamy innocence from primary pain.

The exhibition's odd man out is *A Place to Dream*, a sculpture consisting of a black horse kiddie ride painted with yet more ruefully wide eyes, and a handful of black-eyed-Susans around the base. Innocence here is both cloying and precious, to a fault. While Julien's paintings eke out the more ambiguous spaces of memory and environmental trauma, *A Place to Dream* collapses the narrative solely into one of corrupted childhood.

Julien works from a tender space within the looming glower of environmental racism. In the press release, she states that "[b]eing pushed into a particular space does not allow us to see what is outside of us," which is perhaps not strictly true. Prohibition, or in this case the socio-spatial racism of urban planning, creates longing by enshrining lack. Where Margaret Keane's

desultory toddlers suggest moments in a tragic, but obscure, narrative, Julien's is a quiet kitsch, intermingling world-weariness and wonder towards bits and pieces of nature that, somehow, wormed their way in.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya at team (bungalow)

September 17–
October 22, 2018

A bluish, smoky miasma bathes two life-size studies—or self-portraits—of Paul Mpagi Sepuya. In one, Sepuya's face is obscured—save for the small of his naked thigh and lower torso—as he hunches over a camera fixed to a three-legged tripod. He leans back to peer forward, his hands cradling the device, readying it to shoot the image in question: *Dark Room Mirror Study (OX5A1531)* (all works 2017). Sepuya hugs the fringes of this mirror/photo, his bent body flush with the right side of the picture plane. Across the photographs at team (bungalow), mirrors allow Sepuya (and his friends, lovers, acquaintances) to bask in a closed loop, a self-referential present that welcomes fragments of the past that feel simultaneously speculative and serial.

For starters, the grubby, dust-ridden mirrors that Sepuya employs in his photographs evoke a sensuous “symmetry” to the “drifting vapors of... blue smoke” that pepper Richard Bruce Nugent's elliptical story *Smoke, Lilies and Jade* (1926).¹ Nugent's

presence wafts over the exhibition, with a scrawled note, “R. Bruce Nugent tableaux,” appearing in the work *Studio (OX5A0173)* that hangs beside *Dark Room Mirror Study (OX5A1531)*. By turns romantic and restrained, *Smoke* finds Nugent narrating the wanderings of Alex, an idle and impressionistic 19 year-old black male who meditates on the queer strands to desire, love, sexuality, and aesthetics.

Strikingly, with experimental typography, Nugent implements ellipses throughout the vignette to signify a hesitation in his protagonist's sexuality: his pensiveness is parsed out with a series of ellipses. Without them, and if given over to proper punctuation, the narrative is still legible, lucid. With them, we still encounter male same-sex desire, but in ways that are both “full of holes and yet still... whole.”² While this fluidity imbues itself in the smoky ambiance of *Dark Room Mirror Study*, it also snakes its way across Sepuya's photographic practice that is novel-like and serendipitous, with people and places shuttling in and out, dissolving any preconceived notions of a narrative.

The import of Nugent and *Smoke, Lilies and Jade* is not lost on Sepuya; in an installation at Callicoon Fine Arts, Sepuya included the little-known black literary magazine *Fire!!* that first published Nugent's pioneering prose. Nugent re-appears in *Studio (OX5A0173)*: slivers of Sepuya, his camera, and his tripod can be seen

standing behind three, narrow floor-to-ceiling collages, with one featuring that scribbled note to Nugent. From the collages to the studio space itself, visual excess—in threeness—manifests in ways that echo Nugent's use of ellipses in *Smoke, Lilies and Jade*.

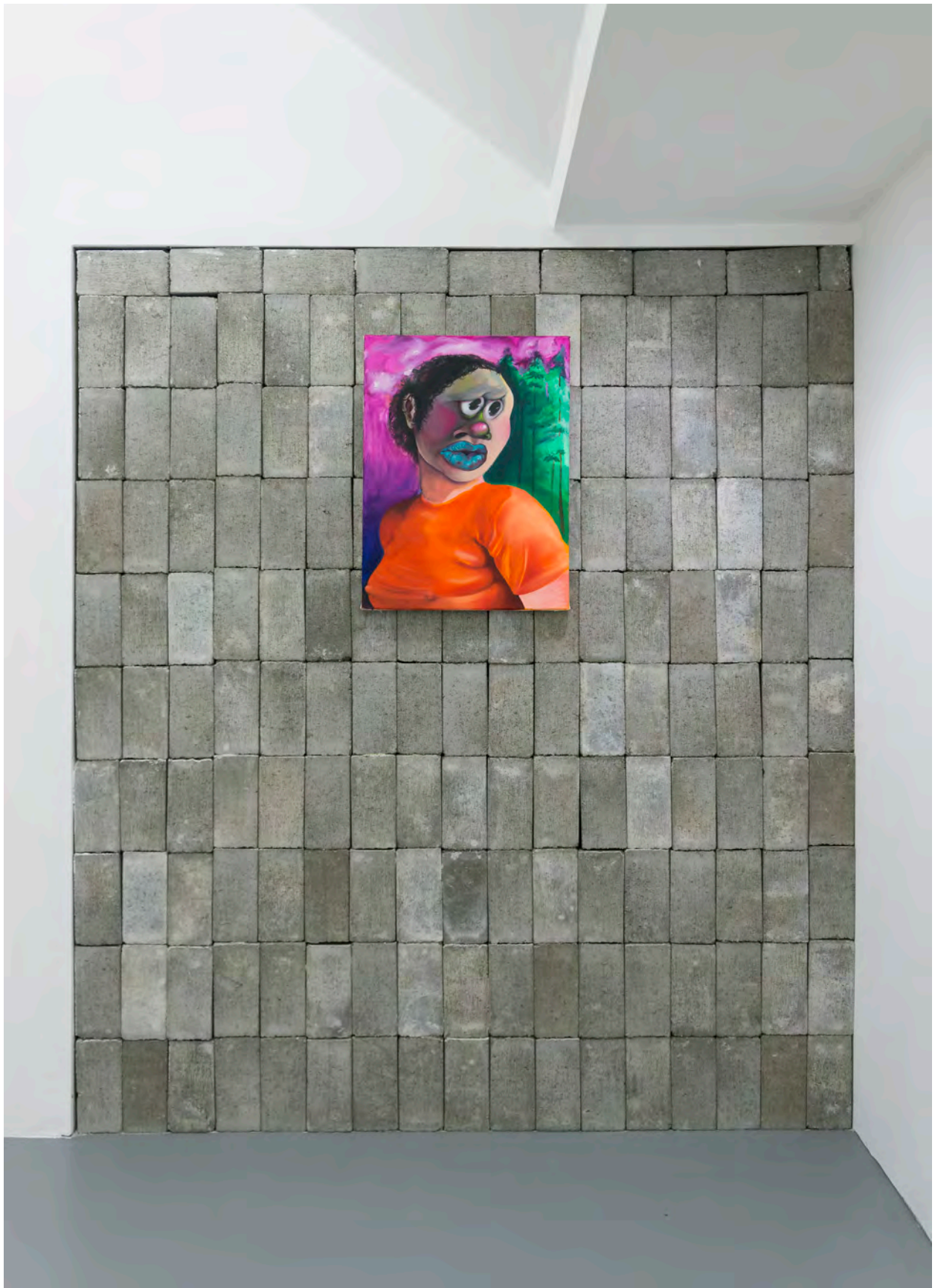
Venturing inside the bungalow reveals, further, how the self, for Sepuya, is decidedly produced “on the fringes of portraits of other people.”³ *Dark Room Mirror (2010899)* and *(2080162)* find Sepuya more front and center, sharing the frame with another body. In both images, Sepuya holds a camera to his face, a gesture that flits between voyeurism and narcissism—a desire to see oneself and others.⁴ The other body here—across both works—happens to be the same slender man of olive complexion. On the surface, these photographs are unremarkable. Yet the RAW file numbering—and the different bodies in *Dark Room Mirror (202060999)*—suggests two separate encounters. On this evidence, Sepuya's titles offer up serial record of what images made the cut and what was left on the cutting room floor. Sitting with this equivocal trace of omitted images intimates an elliptical form to Sepuya's practice, which is a mirroring of Nugent's desire to be direct and un-closeted about documenting what is often relegated to the shadows.⁵

That this constructive mode of desire still exists even when exposing the slippages in one's photographic process

Ikechukwu Casmir
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1. Richard Bruce, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade, A Novel, Part I,” *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, October 31, 1926, 36-39.

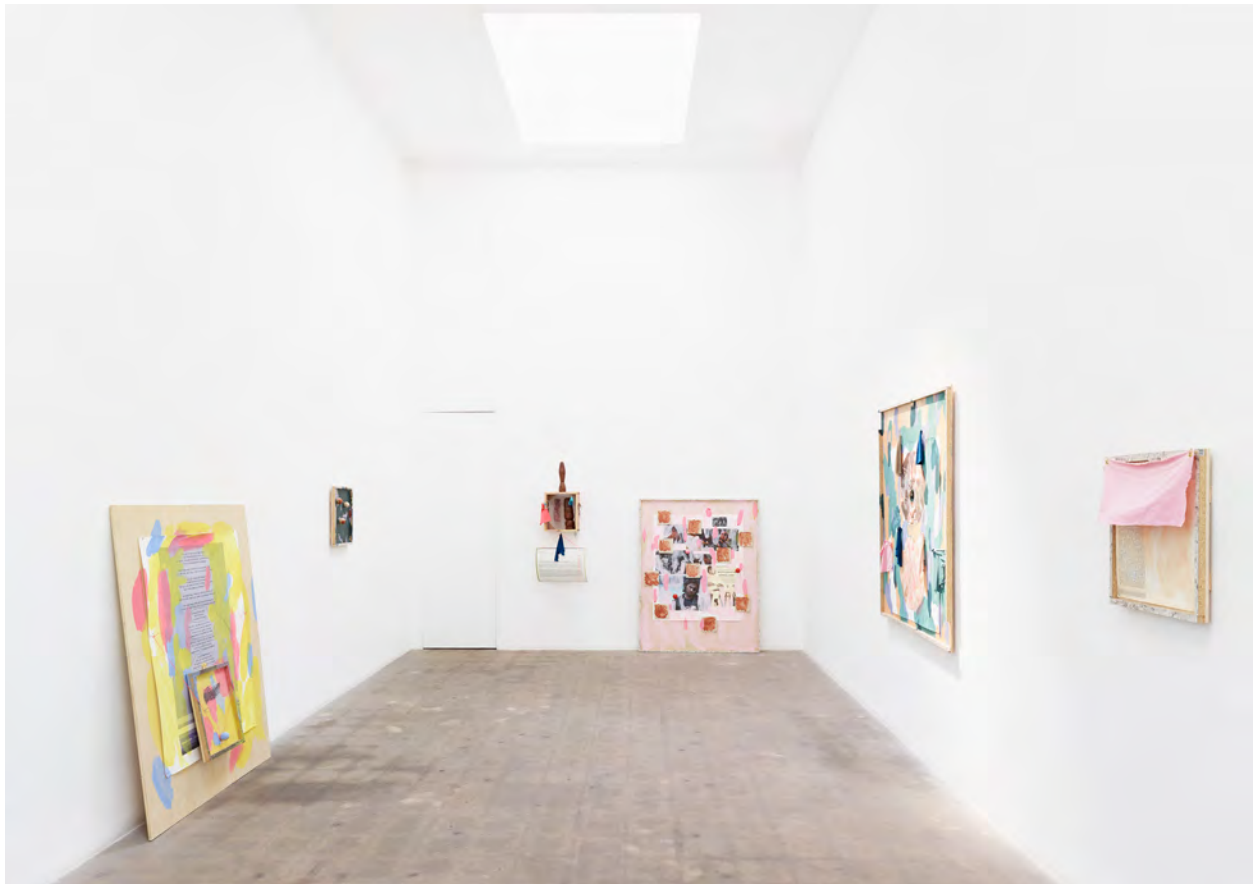
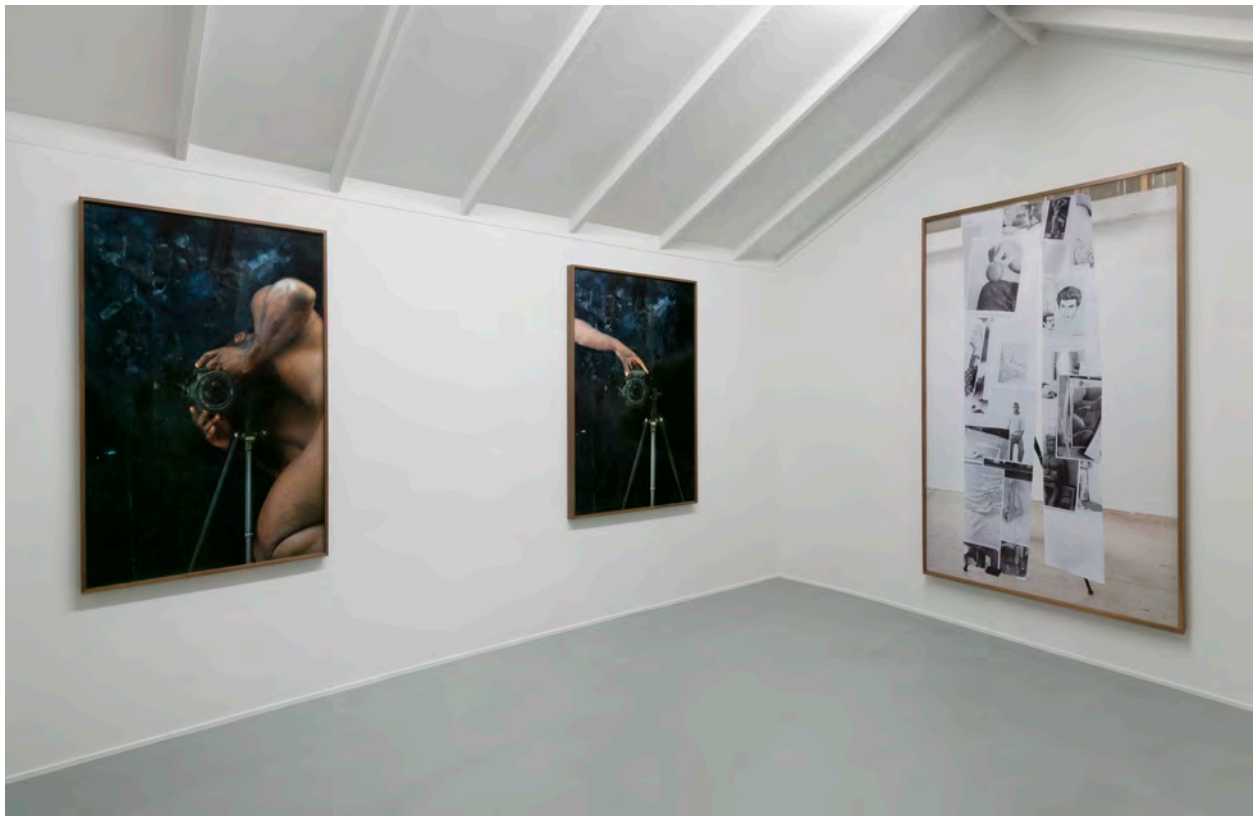
2. Richard Glavey, “Squandering Your Potential with Richard Bruce Nugent,” in *The Wallflower Avant-garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82.



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Cheyenne Julien, *Summer Camp* (2017) (installation view). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 18 × 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and SMART OBJECTS.



2
Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Dark Room* (2017) (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artist and team (bungalow).
Photo: Jeff McLane.

3
Ravi Jackson, *Ice on Soul* (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder.

reveals the many (queer) sides to ellipses: communicating an unfinished thought, a trailing voice, or a moment of pause to reflect. These pensive places are generative, with Sepuya reflecting that his desire to document the self comes out of a “strange” feeling in his studio, which is to say a queer feeling that, yes, finds him disoriented, but also creating from that self-same space of dislocation, queerness.⁶ At the same time, when the past feels, in many respects, like a gulf of disappearance, it is encouraging to witness *Dark Room* and the way non-normative sightlines of yore emerge through oblique arrangements. The overlooked past felt present here thanks to how Sepuya looks to find his way, to gather ground differently even if it’s grounded in an openness to deviation. Though Sepuya’s deviant horizons at times appear repetitive in their format, they dwell in a speculative realm that does “not reproduce what we follow but instead create[s] wrinkles in the earth.”⁷ Wrinkles, ultimately, in how we see ourselves.

3. Boško Blagojević, “A Conversation between Boško Blagojević and Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Studio Work* (Minneapolis: Franklin Artworks, 2012), 29.

4. Sabine T. Kriebel, “Theories of Photography: A Short History,” in *Photography Theory (The Art Seminar)*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 33.

5. Nugent was open with his homosexuality, stating “I have never been in what they call ‘the closet.’” Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 268.

6. Blagojević, “Conversation,” 29.

7. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 179.

Ravi Jackson at Richard Telles Gallery

September 9–
October 14, 2017

I hadn’t thought this much about balls in a long time; but there they were, hanging out in Ravi Jackson’s debut solo exhibition *Ice on Soul* at Richard Telles Gallery: a messy, complex, and exciting presentation. In 13 untitled paintings (all 2017), Jackson pulls together a range of poignant associations that circle the drain around issues of masculinity. All the works draw heavily from the complicated writings in Eldridge Cleaver’s infamous text, *Soul on Ice*, from which the exhibition takes its name.

It’s hard to ignore the pedestrian quality of Jackson’s media: plywood, MDF, melamine, children’s cabinetry knobs, eye hooks and grommets, acrylic paint, swatches of cheap fabric, and feathered earrings from trendy seasons of yore. Print outs of Donatello’s *David*, a Black Bart Simpson, Kurt Russell as Snake Plissken, eBay bidding pages, and typo-speckled Facebook posts are posed as vital as any stroke of paint. They share their surfaces with little hierarchy; they all intrude on one other in collaborative overlap—building meaning through interruption.

All the layers, seemingly casual in their placement, are in a sexy state of *dishabille*—forever some-

where between undress and redress. Painted-over records become exposed breasts, eyes, targets; cabinet knobs stand-in for colloquial “knobs”; cut-outs are portholes, glory holes, and every bodily orifice you can think of; brass hooks are “come hither” fingers; draped fabric becomes loin cloths, flirtatious hemlines, or a curtain for a certain Courbet.¹

But of these objects, the most euphemistic are the upturned furniture legs. In previous works, Jackson affixed them so that they stood straight out from their canvases. Here, the legs sit upturned on shelves, robbed of their supportive purpose and effectively neutered in the process. In their inversion and isolation they transform: they become phallic totems, miniature Brancusi’s... or butt plugs?

Furthest from the door, in a modest shadowbox, Jackson has posed a leg beside a hanging brown clod. Dangling below is Cleaver’s essay-cum-poem, “To All Black Women From All Black Men”; his landmark but problematic text details his return to the love of Black women while reifying a hegemonic masculinity, misogynistic perspectives, and shades of anti-blackness. In this arrangement, the virile male phallus is likened to the spent, the soft, and the fecal; which could lead one to gather that rigid masculinity isn’t worth shit—it’s far more complicated than that.

Beside the shadowbox, a smattering of eye-patched Snake Plisskens

Hana Cohn

1. Gustave Courbet, *L’Origine du monde [The Origin of the World]*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 46 × 55 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

stare out from among 1975 advertisements for the centerpiece of Eldridge de Paris' new Fall collection.² *You'll Be Cock of the Walk* it announces. *They're for men only... Real men... the three-fisted variety*. An essentialized representation of a black man (the model is Cleaver) sits on the same plane as the equally hyper-manly Plissken. Floating around them are the sienna-hued smudges reminiscent of the scatological affinities of Jean Dubuffet. Between the marks, loose flesh-colored smears of paint recall the evocative scrawls of Cy Twombly. And all these men sit swaddled and rustling behind a sheer veil of pink and under the historic weight of Robert Rauschenberg's *Rebus*.

Jackson's paintings are a workspace and a bed and they call to us. His hazy saccharine scribbles and candy-colored balls bouncing between the manliest men ask us to play. Nearby, a human-scale print of the lyrics from the Isley Brothers' *Between the Sheets* croons over us. Across the room, through a shroud of greens, the soft and somber faces of Donatello's *David* look on at an outlandish display of manhood. All at once Jackson manages to lasso notions of machismo—of the black, big-screen, and Modernist, pop cultural, and 'high-brow' variety—and offers them as equal players in trafficking an impenetrable (and often false-front) model of masculinity. By plotting them all on the same plane, Jackson forces them to intrude on one another, denying any

one incarnation total completion or certitude. Each one, no longer impervious, emulates the incredible complexity, messiness, and beauty that the masculine can be.

***Tactility of the Line* at Elevator Mondays**

**September 18–
October 23, 2018**

As a teen I practiced "finding the apex" while driving the winding back stretch of road to my parents' house. Finding the apex, or "finding the line" as it's defined by race car drivers, was a strategy my brother taught me to go faster: instead of hugging turns, I guided the car toward the center of the street to avoid losing time by turning the wheel. I made my own path outside the painted boundaries provided by the city, believing wholeheartedly that I was accelerating through my dull suburban girlhood. My teenage angst was confined by the road, or so I thought, and finding the line was a way to seek a path where speed added to the illusion of my great escape. The line was what I made it.

Though the primacy of the line is postured as a curatorial departure point in *Tactility of the Line*, a group exhibition at Elevator Mondays, five artists transcend its simplicity and use it as a way to embody a central energy, expressing it through texture, an illusion of movement, and

volume in order to consider its implications beyond its trapped position in formal art historical contexts. By elaborating shape and mood, the artists offer a more palpable experience that's sharpened by the tight quarters of the space: a small freight elevator.

Art meets the body at a kinetic point; the distance between an artist and her work—both psychic and physical—is undeniably intimate. When shown in a cramped space like an elevator, this distance is instantly mitigated. To be close to art—to smell it or bump against it feels antithetical to more traditional spaces like galleries or museums where close proximity to art is discouraged.

One of the biggest payoffs to being close to the art in *Tactility* is found in the color and texture of Jonathan Ryan's painting *Rio Trio* (2016), which pulls the eye like an obstacle course. Its bright graphic quality evinces monster truck rallies with a serpentine racetrack that is stippled with actual dirt. A flat lack of perspective not unlike an ancient bas relief lets time collapse through the curves of orange and white striped chicanes. On the opposite wall, hangs Michael Kennedy Costa's inky *Low Wind* (2016), whose title speaks of natural or windblown movement and evidences an emotive touch within a convention of linework. Costa's curvature is spirited and open. A wispy portrait emerges.

The only truly touchable piece is Tanya Brodsky's *OH, YEAHH* (2017), which

2. Eldridge Cleaver's sole foray into the fashion world.

acts as the literal gateway to the exhibition, adhered to the elevator's entrance. Her sculptural metal gate is made to look pliable, with bent grates cradling a giant yellow balloon. The Gallagher-style humor in Brodsky's fictive gate softens the act of disfiguration, making hard metal seem responsive to the slightest touch as it swings through the space.

Elsewhere, Connor Fields utilizes materiality to propose a bit of physics-defying magic in *Sedimentary Straw* (2017). A bendy plastic straw shunts through a seemingly hard mineral hung high above the door; its vantage point is only accessible if you step inside the room, standing near Fields' *Green Stratum* (2017), a floor piece of a sulky rock-like form with a green strip of silicone sediment. It sits heavy next to Ariel Herwitz's *Olive Branch* (2017), a tangle of overdyed yarn the color of mopwater that hung hairlike from a cut of maple wood and suspended a few inches above the floor, barely levitating despite its tired weight. It reads as an offering to the room and is bound with a rust-like ceramic ring, cut before it completes its circle. Both works feel totemic and earthbound without cliché symbolism, their languid quality contrast with the humor and lightness found in other works.

In the round, the arrangement of *Tactility* bounces between feeling free form and crowded, compressed but expressive. There's an unexpected freedom in the confinement at Elevator Mondays that

leads the act of looking without any easy choices or right turns. There is no going fast, but rather the viewer is forced to move incrementally, reestablishing a relationship to their body—boundaries can be intimate and constraints often lead to deeper and more exciting results.

***Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at New Museum (L.A. in N.Y.)**

**September 27, 2017–
January 21, 2018**

New York's New Museum marks its 40th year with the multi-floor exhibition *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*. With well over 40 artists, the project, curated by Johanna Burton and Sara O'Keeffe, is an earnest effort to present and notate a group of practices that understand gender as one among various shared lattices of unstable and variable categories of difference. Resisting impasse or impenetrability in the tangle of discourse and art-making around "identity," *Trigger* at best emerges with an argument for pleasure in approach, for feeling one's body within its insistently networked configurations and installations.

While the majority of the artists are New York based, most often their practices contain far vaster social, sexual, material,

and molecular networks. These webs also provide a means for better entering this lineage. A.L. Steiner and A.K. Burns's *Community Action Center* stands as a major example: a 69-minute porno-adventure film pulsing with the many desires (and soundtracks) of the artists' sprawling queer community. Made in 2010, the artists bring specific viewing limitations—against the solo Pornhub user, it may only be watched in a group—that take up the functioning possibility of pre-configuring the presence of a viewer's body. Entering the territory of pornography, the work resists the violence of its tropes and toys, holding out space for desire between the participating friends and lovers.

Wu Tsang's 2015 *Girl Talk* takes up its own mode for reverie and entanglement, filmed in slow motion as Fred Moten, one of Tsang's long-term collaborators, danced in the sun. This four-minute pivot is given a red-carpeted room of its own, set to an a cappella version of Betty Carter's *Girl Talk*. Sung slow, the lyrics describe getting ready with friends, and the uncontainable social web that gossip is. *Hormonal Fog (Study #3)*, a collaboration between Patrick Staff and Candice Lin, keeps contact through dispersal. The work is a mist containing a herbal tincture of natural anti-androgens (such as licorice), that seeps undetected into the museum lobby. This operation, both literal and conceptual, functions to inconvenience the

Laura Brown

apparent determinability of a body's transformation, and the imagined bounds to the materials involved; specifically hormonal, broadly chemical.

Staff's *Weed Killer*, commissioned earlier this year by L.A.'s MOCA, is reinstalled for *Trigger*. Crossing chemical and thermal paths, the work speaks to convulsive experiences of sickness and chemical transformation under pharmacopornographic time. If *Hormonal Fog* might disseminate the unknown, Staff and Lin's more substantial and physical works in the show confirm, given scale, the real networks that substantiate a community and a body alike. Adaptation and devoted reference is found across *Trigger*—to mentors, collaborators, characters, books—providing a means for reaching across time and making contact with the containers of its liveness. It is also inherent to *Trigger* as a project, confirming and celebrating this field and family.

Within all this, Stanya Kahn's 2010 video *It's Cool, I'm Good* swims in its own unconfirmed fictions. Kahn, whose body is exceedingly bruised and bandaged, makes it with optimism around innumerable scenes. Questions about the cause of this apparent trauma arise throughout the 35-minute trip, with Kahn giving new answers depending on the turn. The jester stacks her storytelling between urgent anecdotes, finding forms for comedy and pleasure in her wounded state.

These shape shifting refrains echo across *Trigger*, mapping together precarity, pleasure, humor, family. *Trigger* is placed in the urgent midst of what Burton terms "deep incompatibilities—highlighted by disagreements about identity—at the heart of today's cultural sphere." Perhaps the show's irksome title best betrays this context, a collection of charged keywords (trigger, gender, tool, weapon) mostly indicative of a determined press department. If such limitations abound, they visibly provide the extents for *Trigger*'s ambitions and insufficiencies alike.

The exhibition's real achievement might just be its care for the pleasure of approaching these works. While this might be found within the very networked forms and formats that these artists (and curators) ask after, the ambitious project of meaningfully and museologically notating a genealogy falls short. In the show's discursive positioning, and the very title, remains a question about violence today. With its own devoted, possessive, networked forms, this violence, in *Trigger* barely tracked, is also often the obsessive source for pleasure. What, and where, is *this* entanglement?

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Michael Kennedy Costa,
Low Wind (2016). Ink on paper,
8.5 x 11 inches. Image
courtesy of the artist and
ELEVATOR MONDAYS.

5

Christina Quarles, *Beautiful
Mourning* (2017). Acrylic on
canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Image
courtesy of the artist and David
Castillo Gallery. Collection
David Castillo, Miami.



5

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