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The Realness or, Liquid Smoke or, This is What the F••k Boutta Happen

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The Realness

or,

Liquid smoke

or,

This is what the f•k boutta happen
When mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, a hail of crushing ash besieged Pompeii. All activity in the diverse and populous city came to a violent halt and would remain frozen in time for almost 2000 years. In the mid-1860s, a little over a century after the city’s accidental rediscovery, archaeological superintendent, Giuseppe Fiorelli, devised a trailblazing (for its era) method of exhuming the contours of the dead, whose last living gestures were preserved in precise detail below the calcified mass. Pouring plaster into the hollows formed by the degradation of flesh, Fiorelli’s excavation yielded haunting, statuesque casts of the dead in their final throes; their bones embedded within the hard, mineral casing.

The basketball, for its popular associations with the NBA’s overwhelmingly Black player demographics (and starkly contrasted 95% white executive field), becomes a potent abstract symbol of Black objectivity. By appropriating the plaster-cast technique I connect the means of my artistic production with the historical disinterment of bodies at Pompeii, while simultaneously addressing the less-than-honorable treatment of black bodies both pre- and post- mortem in global societies. My sculptures thus reference the Body through both spatio-physical presence and conceptual analyses of Black bodily commodification giving way to objecthood in the social domain.

Contrary to the dictates of chromatic theory, black and white are not neutral colors. Filtered through the lens of racial analysis, they become politicized as

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1 Slavery–
metaphors for divergent ontological states. Traditional photography\textsuperscript{2} is thus laden with objective symbolism for its inherent ability to render life within that monochromatic range; it is for this reason that I utilize the medium to depict ruinous states of both the personal and archaeo-historical realms.\textsuperscript{3}

In his article “All Black Everything,” Jared Sexton proposes two divergent understandings of the notorious color. His ruminations posit black at the basis of life’s most basic paradox,

On the one hand, we find descriptions of black as a force of incorporation, swallowing up all light and color, all meaning and desire and fantasy, even all existence, so much so that ‘our lives consist of those things that we draw away

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item I was introduced to photography when I was 14 via a toy camera I received for Christmas from my mother. It was a trendy gift at the time, film photography was making a resurgence after what had been a decade-long stride in the opposite direction, technologically. I became obsessed with the practice, shooting blurry double exposures of my day-to-day and after participating in extra-curricular and summer courses in a range of photography programs, I arrived at classroom 162 of the Allen building—prepared to study under Pipo Nguyen-Duy whose description of the photo facilities at an admissions event were the key to my enrollment at Oberlin. I was one of two freshmen enrolled in a high level photography course that year and at 18 years old I figured my artistic course was set (ha!). In the spring of my sophomore year I enrolled in a photography based mixed-media course and began to develop a strong material interest after learning how to print on silk and muslin using traditional Van Dyke and Cyanotype processes. This period of material experimentation became foundational to my expansion into three dimensional work.

I began to synthesize my interests as a junior, in an installation where I used found objects to build the set for a series of self-portraits which were then reinstalled within the space. It was my first attempt at conceptualizing my relationship to race and sex in my work, but by the beginning of the Senior Thesis course I had grown uncomfortable with the audience’s ability to identify me in the photographs. I felt that the presentation of my nude body to such a proximate audience did not necessitate enough engagement to warrant consideration beyond fetishization. That discomfort would ultimately become the prompt for my recent work, \textit{Grey Hoodie}, which predicates itself on compulsory consumption.

\item My first forays into sculpture were markedly minimal; an interest that emerged after researching the Earthworks movement for an exhibit my former boss was curating at the Allen. Those artists situated their conceptual works, extensions of the Minimalist tradition, in vast rural expanses across the country thereby connecting the human body to the greater landscape through the experiential allure of the site. My early sculptures were attempts at merging my conceit of the visible body as site with a formalist aesthetic and racial symbology. In critique, though, my peers felt that the work was unsuccessful because it relied too heavily on aesthetics without a solid basis. Revisiting notions of “site” led me to consider the one most dear to me; New York City’s towering skyline and consequential precarity. To navigate within such overt displays of technological grandeur is to feel quite literally like “an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon. 82)…
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
from the black.’ In this sense, black is best seen not at all, as noncolor and as nonseeing, the failure or impossibility or limit of seeing. Like an astrophysical singularity, we agree to the undeniable importance of the effects of black without being so sure as to the nature of its existence. On the other hand, we have meditations, running from the ancient period to the present, about black as the color of sight itself, as what sight cannot see about its own seeing. ‘To truly see black would require the loss of any visible light, meaning in fact that all would be black.’ One sees black and black alone, or one sees everything else without it, we might even say against it… Black, then, begins and ends as a paradox or a problem of definition; it may even be the paradox or problem of definition itself, which is to say the paradox or problem of beginning and ending, being and nothingness.

To contend that the color black is the sublime incorporation of all light and existence necessitates that the creation of our individual lives be a reductive process: a peeling away from the black. In this way, we can interpret the day-to-day as a lived occupation of negative space. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes in his analysis of de Anima, “[Aristotle] tells us that the actuality (energeia)… is light, and that darkness is its potentiality… darkness, we may therefore say, is in some way the color of potentiality” (180). I am motivated by this understanding of darkness giving way to probable futures as it situates Black people in a realm of unlimited freedom. If all lived experience as an occupation of negative, and therefore imaginary space, Black people are of its inverse, positive space; the Real.

Evaluating a series of absolute statements according to the Aristotelian model above produces (but is not limited to) the following series of foils:
The bright areas of white and grey that distinguish my photographs from black infinity are then the visible records of lived experience, and thus representations of that which has been “drawn away”. But to understand both the positive and negative space as originating in the same abyss philosophically reduces my photographs to plain, black rectangles; a framework that imbues the images with the potential to be either abstract or figurative. In this way, my work across media consistently refers back to the paradoxical space that black creates, using it as a model to understand other contradictory states. My work is situated between the actual and the potential, subverting binary relationships, including the very one from which it emerges.

My sculptures take thematic inspiration from David Hammons' work *Higher Goals*, which consists of five, 30-foot tall basketball hoops decorated with intricate bottle cap designs. The artist inaugurated the sculptures’ installation in Cadman Plaza

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4 where my attention is more specifically focused on overdeveloped landscapes, the absence of white people on the subway (except, somehow, when they’re getting off at my stop) and the industry as a socially stratifying economic sector — less on condemning tech-based access to knowledge or the harmful acts of specific companies.

5 where I really mean depletion of the earth’s resources in the interest of technological advancement, whitewashing of urban centers and displacement of people of color to benefit New Money settlers (who made themselves all the more vulnerable in the event of social uprising when they ordained transparent towers the abode du jour.

6 In February of 2018 I saw Latoya Ruby Frazier speak at Gavin Brown’s Harlem gallery. During the Q&A, I worked up the courage to ask whether she felt that Black and white photography hastened or slowed down the rate of the audience’s consumption. For some reason I have always felt that she was bothered by the question, she seemed to answer it hastily, though not without thought. Part of her response addressed the photographic negative being an inversion of positive space, “In order to achieve pure white in a print,” she said, “the negative has to be pure black” (emphasis added). I was struck by the quote at the time, I think because it validated my interest in photography by providing me with a clean metaphor as to why. It stays with me now though, as a wanton wish; a blueprint for an impossible home.
Park in Brooklyn Heights with a ritualistic performance that alluded to the indigenous practices which inspired their decoration. But where Hammons’ goals and their symbolic unattainability pay specific homage to the NBA, my work appropriates his visual language to make broader reference to the limitations enforced against Black people in the inverted space of the social world.

My interactive work, *Grey Hoodie*, is a direct reference to Bruce Nauman’s *Body Pressure*, an instructional performance piece which relies on the audience’s performance of written directives in the gallery and encourages their removal of the printed commands. The stack of printed instructions itself becomes a proxy for a body that the audience is complicit in consuming by engaging the work according to the artists wishes. The grey hoodie, which, compounded by violent racist assumptions, was one of the factors that led to Trayvon Martin’s labeling as “suspicious” the night of his murder, would later emerge as a symbol of solidarity with his family; donned as a social performance of proxy victimhood by staunch activists and casual marchers alike. In my work, I am positing my physical Black Body as the static, surrogate “black body” that is often evoked in scholarship after the messiness of the real one is forgotten. Granting the viewer access to the site (and sight) of my nude body, while

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7 I gave considerable thought to performance when I returned to Oberlin from New York after seeing Bruce Nauman’s exhibit. It was January and my bedroom had a terrible draft. I got used to sleeping in a hoodie, a black Oberlin zip-up that became the ritual costume of my nightly solo performance. At 12:54:50 AM on the night of January 29th, 2019 (my phone reminds me now), I tossed the hoodie onto my bed (see fig 2.). The sweater seemed to have enveloped an invisible figure, human but somehow also in flight. I immediately thought about Trayvon Martin and the angelic expression he wears below the brim of his grey hoodie in that famous photo. And of course of the “threat” that the same object represents to white America. How could one object be both a protective shield and a call to arms at the same time?
simultaneously imploring them to consume it becomes a political statement, an active reclamation of my agency in the creation of the interaction.\textsuperscript{8}

On Saturday, September 30th, 1967, Robert Smithson went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue and bought a one-way ticket to Passaic, New Jersey.\textsuperscript{9} Observing his surroundings, he found a series of unconventional monuments, “ruins in reverse,” representing neither histories nor people, rather colossal fragments of yet untapped potential.

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines- mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin.

It is this anachronistic potential which draws me to industrial media\textsuperscript{10} such as plywood and cinder blocks. Their practical existence as construction materials reflexively renders them twofold “deconstruction materials,” evidenced by their presence on overgrown lots and pre-ruinous build-sites. There is a distant relationship to nature implied by both materials, the rock base of the cinder block and the processed planes

\textsuperscript{8} A personal rebellion against my discomfort with last year’s self-portraits.

\textsuperscript{9} “On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet Paperback called Earthworks by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic…” (Smithson).

\textsuperscript{10} In my early experiments in minimalism, I was drawn to latex for its resonance with scarred, traumatized skin. Grommets, which were previously only utilitarian became laced with meaning when piercing the synthetic material. Arranging perforations along a grid, I experimented creating rigid abstract linear formations in latex, nodding formally to Sol Lewitt’s wall drawings. It was not until I developed my first floor sculptures, however, that I became aware of my automatic inclination towards plaster, plywood and steel wire, in addition to the latex and grommets I had already been experimenting with. For me, they echo New York’s hard, familiar and manufactured landscape, and exist as fragmentary extensions of that whole.
of plywood sheets each calling to their uncorrupted cousins in the prehistoric world. In this way, they exist in liminal spaces, having undergone human manipulation from their raw states as the most elemental materials on earth to the foundational ruins of a society moving forward too quickly. This tension stalls the materials in time, forbidding them pro- or regression, not unlike the Casts of Pompeii.

I entered my senior year, retrospectively, a total novice. In nearly four years I had only taken courses in reproducible media (photography and printmaking) and never pushed myself to interrogate my interest in sculpture past a nice but vague potential until it was almost too late. I entered my senior year with a lot of catching up to do, all the while hurtling indomitably forward with the backwind force of a thousand jet engines. I do not know if I will stand by this writing in 10 years, but I see the completion of this body of work as at least setting the course towards whichever, better idea makes me change my mind.

Right now I am in bed, it is 2 AM and I cannot stop thinking about my thesis. I am shaking my head at myself, trying to walk the Minoan\textsuperscript{11} pathway from photography to sculpture and struggling with the former’s emphasis on technical reproduction. There is something to be said, I think, about a basketball-shaped rubber mold’s ability to duplicate. But as my practice moves away from the tangible and into a realm of potential, I want my output not to shy away from its desired form in the name of mechanized reproduction, but to step into the light with a bold claim; \textit{this is what the f**k boutta happen}.

\textsuperscript{11} In Western mythology, King Minos’ daughter and goddess of the Labyrinth, Ariadne, helps Theseus defeat the minotaur by giving him a ball of string with which to trace his path out of the maze.
fig 1.


fig 2.
Works Cited


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