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ArtReview

Hamishi Farah Paints Beyoncé and Roberto Cavalli

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Hamishi Farah, *Live-in Whale instead of Nation State idea*, 2021–23, oil on linen, 208 x 109 cm. Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

A message about nation-states and independence can be found where you least expect it

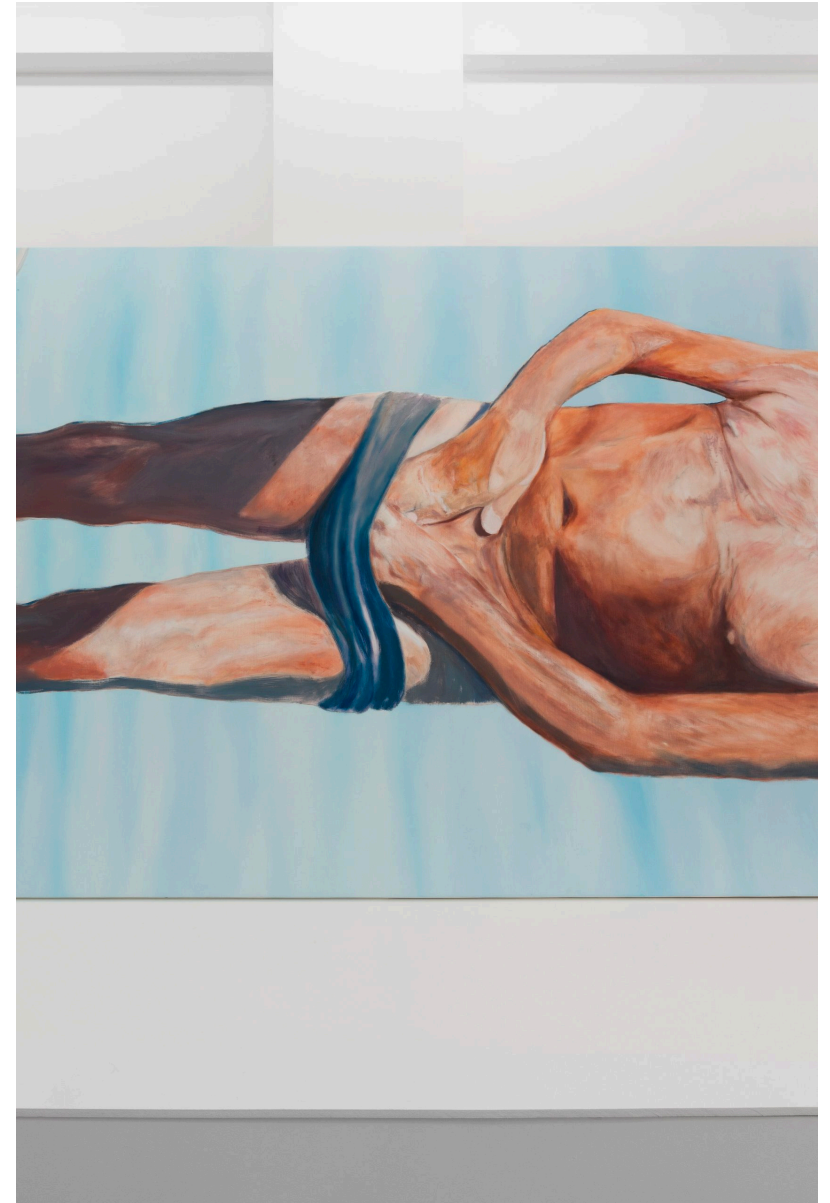
It's evening, and Beyoncé and Jay-Z are taking a dip in a milky blue lagoon, surrounded by bare and craggy hills. Behind the couple, a little way off, the heads of three other bathers are just about visible, although their features are fogged by the steam that rises from the surface of the water. At the shoreline stands a figure in hi-vis overalls attending to a huge circular lamp, which beams lemony light across the lagoon like a proxy sun. Bright as it is, it can't compete with the wattage of the superstar performers' smiles, their luminous joy at being here, now, together – looking so crazy in love.

This is Hamishi Farah's painting *Beyoncé and Jay-Z (The Love of Things)* (2023), a slightly sickly-looking exercise in photorealism that's hung near the entrance to the Somali-Australian artist's tight, funny and politically barbed show of four new works. Almost nothing in the way of contextual information accompanies this canvas, but a Google Image search reveals that it's based on a photo that Beyoncé posted to Instagram in 2014, during a trip with her husband to a geothermic spa in Iceland. Are we being asked to attend to the contrast between the tourists (Black American members of the 0.1%, whose lyrics often hymn unbridled capitalism) and their vacation spot (a small, overwhelmingly white, Nordic island-nation, which experienced a systemic banking collapse during the late 2000s), and then read the work as meditation on race, neoliberalism and the idea of alien visitation, or even invasion? Looking at the grinning lovers, I'm reminded of their duet *Apeshit* (2018), which contains the line "I'm a Martian, they wishin' they equal". I get to thinking of Iceland's Viking past, and its peaceful, mildly social-democratic present; of internet conspiracy theories about Beyoncé and Jay-Z belonging to a shadowy group of global puppeteers known as the Illuminati, and the title of the rapper's best-known track, *Empire State of Mind* (2009).



Beyoncé and Jay-Z (The Love of Things), 2023, oil on linen, 109 × 79 cm.
Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

At the far end of the gallery hangs *Statement from Howard Kennedy LLP on behalf of their client regarding the colonisation and reappropriation of the physical body associated with Italian fashion designer Roberto Cavalli* (2023), a work in the form of a legal document, drafted by a law firm at Farah's behest. Its purpose is to declare a sovereign state located in the 'territory' of the eighty-two-year-old couturier's person, without his prior knowledge or consent, 'while endeavouring to safeguard and uphold [his] inherent dignity, integrity, and inviolability'. This may be legally possible (I'm no lawyer), but it's also patently absurd, although no less so than any of the territorial claims staked by European powers during their rush to colonise the Earth. Nearby, the 4.55m-high painting *Roberto Cavalli* (2023) is propped on its side against a sloping white ramp, as though it were awaiting wrapping and shipment. The canvas depicts Cavalli wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy swimming trunks, into which he plunges his hands. Squinting out at us, his wrinkled, sagging skin slathered in semenlike sunscreen, he bears an unfortunate resemblance to a lifelong public masturbator who at this late stage in his career can no longer be bothered to conceal his frantic tugging beneath a raincoat. So much for Farah upholding his 'inherent dignity'.



Roberto Cavalli (detail), 2023, oil on linen, 455 × 185 cm. Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

The painting is based on a 2013 long-lens paparazzi photo of Cavalli on his yacht, hosing down after a swim. If we detect a strong element of body shaming, and some troubling issues around consent, this may be Farah's point. In the same year the paparazzi shot was taken, the couturier published a digitally manipulated image of Beyoncé wearing one of his gowns, in which the singer's celebrated curves were photoshopped out. Many commentators saw this as an attempt to make her physique confirm to a white standard of beauty, and as a denial of a Black woman's bodily sovereignty. In contrast, Farah's painting of Cavalli doesn't deviate from its source. He's presented as he is: a pale, frail male.

Opposite *Roberto Cavalli* hangs *Live-in Whale instead of Nation State idea* (2021–23), a painting based on a stock photo of a breaching hump-back whale. One way in which new states gain legitimacy is through their recognition by neighbouring powers. Will this ocean-dwelling leviathan – this alien intelligence – give the nod to Farah's attempt to colonise the couturier? Maybe not (what do whales care for land claims?), although I suspect that Bey and Jay might well approve

Figuring Figuration

Larne Abse Gogarty laments the absence of serious critical debate about the return to figuration in painting, especially the seeming lack of awareness of the high stakes involved in depicting people in relation to the politics of representation.

On 17 January 2023 the artist Katja Seib posted an image to her Instagram Stories of a squished tube of paint with the line, 'and out of a sudden [sic] everyone hates figurative painting again'. While glib, Seib's comment is provocative, given the exponential boom in figurative painting over the past decade or so, from which she has certainly benefitted (Salerooms AM443, 444, 445). In December 2022, the critic Barry Schwabsky also sounded the alarm, publishing a piece in *The Nation* which, while extolling the virtues of the artists Christina Quarles, Issy Wood and Paula Wilson, suggested the enthusiasm for figurative painting may be nearing exhaustion. The category of 'zombie abstraction' had, of course, already been repurposed in 2020 by Alex Greenberger to describe the market's appetite for so-called 'zombie figuration'. I want to take stock here of this rise and potential decline of the genre in the recent past, making connections to historical 'returns' of the figure while also addressing how and why this kind of painting has been granted primacy within the art world's response to recent struggles around the politics of identity.

Seib is among the painters whose work I became aware of around 2018, after I started working at the Slade School of Fine Art. In my first term in the job, I saw dozens of paintings of people being made: from ethereal color field-style canvases with floaty female figures to large

grotesqueries which situated painting as storytelling; from neon cartoon-like figures situated in voids to energetic portraits which evoked a sustained intimacy between sitter and painter. Despite my close engagement with contemporary artists who work with figuration, including Nicole Eisenmann and Kerry James Marshall (Interview AM421), as an art historian trained in the histories of western modernism, the dominance of representational forms of painting as compared with abstract painting among young art students was surprising, especially given the fact that there seemed to be little reference to the fraught debates that have accompanied the history of figurative painting after abstraction.

Since then, while looking at all the endless pictures of people made and/or exhibited in recent years – at work, in galleries, on Instagram and in magazines – I have consistently puzzled over what kind of position painters working with representing people are seeking to carve out today. In earlier returns to figuration, painting people was sometimes viewed as regressive and indicative of artistic conservatism or, conversely, privileged as uniquely capable of conveying political struggles, disenfranchisement and suffering. The conflict between these positions has had various flashpoints, from the arguments over the merits of realism vs abstraction as a revolutionary art on the left during the 1930s to the debates about abstraction vs representation within the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the US. Such discussions have often been folded into bigger questions about the politics of representation, as well as the fluctuating relationship between artistic and political radicalism. As an example, one could consider Frank Bowling's 1971 criticism of the work of figurative painter Benny Andrews as a 'denial of form', or Benjamin Buchloh's excoriating analysis in 1981 of the return to figuration in neo-expressionism as being marked by authoritarian, proto-fascistic tendencies. In the complex history of figurative painting after the ascendancy of abstraction, the genre has repeatedly been situated as having specific purchase on the struggles over who counts as human. While on the one hand it has been argued that representation is humanising, on the other it has been viewed as cementing continuing forms of de-humanisation at worst and, at best, as constraining the modes of expression available to those historically marginalised from the institutions of modern art.

Moving towards the present, it is somewhat surprising that few of the arguably central critical voices on contemporary painting, such as David Joselit or Isabelle Graw, have had much to say about the flourishing of figuration over the past decade. This may be to do with the fact that, as Niklas Maak writes, 'figurative painting has become a kind of separate artistic biosphere ... unaffected by art-critical and art-historical debates on painting as a medium'. Yet it is also clear that, while Joselit's 2009 essay 'Painting Beside Itself' remains an obligatory guide to 'network' painting, it has little purchase on more recent figurative painting which typically strives for authenticity, not to mention virtuosity. Joselit's account of how network painting relates to the history of painting can be summarised in his description of how 'a Poussin might land in the hands of Jutta Koether, or Stephen Prina might seize the entire oeuvre of Manet'. While it is clear enough to see how Koether and Prina negotiated the so-called 'death of painting' through emphasising painting as a form of mediation or 'network', Joselit's analysis of those practices cannot really speak to the investment in painterly technique and emotion across a wide-ranging sphere of contemporary painting, from so-called queer figuration to Jordan Casteel's realist portraits or Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings's collaborative frescos, which reach towards history painting.

Indeed, Joselit writes that 'whether in a ludic, or a despairing mode, figuration is partially digested into pure passage', a line I take to signal that figuration was one vehicle among many within network painting. This view strongly relates to Koether's description of painting as an 'abandoned building' when she started making work in the late 1980s, meaning that her relationship to the medium was something like being a squatter, tinkering away with discarded property, the critically devalued status of painting at the time enabling a certain openness as a thinking space or 'psychic site'. Yet, for all this, as Manuela Ammer explains, while it may be possible for figures to appear as 'abstract' in a painting since the 1960s, the capacity for a figure to be fully abstract, in any ideological sense, is limited. And for many of the contemporary painters I am thinking about, they are working in a moment in which the medium, and the specific practice of painting people, is far from the abandoned building described by Koether. Rather, it might be compared with new-build luxury flats, perhaps erected on a site which was formerly home to a bourgeois mansion block or social housing, given that figurative painting for much of the 20th century vacillated between

association with the last gasps of academicism and forms of realism that centred on picturing dispossession, poverty and suffering. In contrast to those positions, the orientation of a significant portion of contemporary figurative painting is towards propertied forms of self-possession: less a thinking space and more a self-actualisation space, marked by shiny exteriors and Instagram-ready subject matter that prioritises photogenic forms of pleasure.

While there has been limited critical discourse compared with the seeming ubiquity of figurative painting in the present, the furore concerning Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket*, displayed at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, is one of the few instances in which the high stakes involved in painting people have been held up to public as well as critical scrutiny. Schutz's painting depicted the body of the 14-year-old black boy, Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Following his death, Till's mother, Mamie, organised the publication of photographs of the open casket in *Jet* magazine, an African-American publication, which led to this case becoming a catalysing moment in the Civil Rights Movement. When Schutz's painting was received with artist-led protests and an open letter requesting it be removed from the Biennial on the grounds that it profited from the spectacle of racist violence (see Hannah Black profile AM412), Schutz defended her work by asserting 'I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother.' This is a claim which, in asserting Schutz and Mamie Till's shared identity of motherhood, suggests that sameness underpins solidarity. Following the Schutz case, one would have expected to see a continued sense of the high stakes involved in the 'return' of the figure, particularly given that the places where this type of painting is primarily being made and exhibited have seen a simultaneous wave of struggles around race, sexuality and gender. While I don't want to dwell on the well-trodden Schutz controversy in much more detail, two important elements are worth pausing upon.

First, for many of her critics, Schutz's decision to paint Emmett Till lying in his casket was a cynical form of seizure because, as George Baker writes, the subject aligned with 'the disfigured figures of her art', collapsing Till's death with the 'artist's own aesthetic' – that is, a kind of repurposed expressionism where disfigurement cohered with that style. This is a gesture Baker associates with one of painting's founding myths: that of Narcissus, and the idea of boundless self-love. Or in other words,

the inability to recognise the other unless you see yourself there. How does this notion of boundless self-love via painterly representation manifest in relation to the contemporary discourses of self-realisation? And, second, how might Schutz's notion that the work's ethical basis rests on her shared identity as a mother with Mamie Till indicate broader limits on how recent figurative painting conceives its politics?

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Identity is situated as a special form of property, painted into the canvas in ways that seek to appeal to fellow proprietors, and, if that isn't available, the work can always be purchased, displayed and circulated in ways that provide buyers, viewers and institutions with a piece of that property, enabling an expansion of the forms of ownership previously in their command.

Consider, for instance, the work of artists who have been associated with what has been described as a school of 'queer figuration', including TM Davy, Louis Fratino and Doron Langberg. Much writing on these painters notes how their recycling of art-historical conventions makes a claim to novelty through the fact that their subjects often include people, and the experience of people, who have historically been excluded from the canon. For the critic Joseph Henry this isn't quite enough, and he relates this artistic formula of, for example, 'cubism + queer life = relevance', to the contemporary mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ politics. Visiting a Fratino exhibition at Sikkema, Jenkins & Co in New York, against the background of a heavily commercialised World Pride in 2019 – the rainbow flag was festooned throughout the city and there was widespread representation of LGBTQ+ lives in commercial advertising – he characterised the situation as one where 'the world gaslit us with tolerance'. This exquisite turn of phrase sharply points out the limits of the political purchase of works such as Fratino's, whose inclusion as an example of queer representation in an otherwise intact canon directly matches the liberal, capitalist notion that freedom of choice represents real freedom.

This notion of adding historically marginalised artists to the canon as a corrective is unfortunately widespread in our current moment, as exemplified in the utter banalisation of feminist art history in Katy Hessel's *The Story of Art without Men*, but also within much recent curatorial history. Indeed, the impulse I am partially pursuing here, to historicise this current phase of figuration's return, is made more compelling because of the numerous institutional revivals of previously marginalised practices. The curatorial gesture of 'correcting the canon' is rarely without complications or compromise. For instance, the elevation of Alice Neel and Charles White to 'great painter' status through major retrospectives has involved an inevitable minimising of the way their commitment to painting people was inextricable from their commitments to communism. Or we could think about how the rehang of MoMA in New York to showcase artists including Florine Stettheimer and Faith Ringgold has involved revising its own history as an institution steeped in boosting the hegemonic status of high abstraction in the mid 20th century. Other examples of curating alternative genealogies to contemporary figurative painting might include the renewed visibility of the Chicago Imagists; the forthcoming exhibition tour of Martin Wong; the centrality of Leonora Carrington to last year's Venice Biennale; or the retrospectives of artists including Claudette Johnson and Lubaina Himid – practices which each shed light on the various turns of figuration today.

Returning to the question of how current figurative painting engages the politics of identity, Henry writes that Fratino's work stimulates 'the immediate gratification of identification', whether 'politicised as a mode of solidarity ("the people in that painting look like me and do what I do")' or through the depiction of erotic pleasure. I want to push at Henry's description of solidarity which centres – like Schutz's mobilisation of motherhood as the ethical ground to *Open Casket* – on the idea of sameness. While Schutz's articulation of sameness rested on experience (motherhood) as a means to override other differences, and Henry's rests on optics that may of course also complicate other differences, both positions suggest that solidarity is based on identification, or that this kind of similarity between subjects ensures a 'correct' progressive politics. This emphasis on sameness does little but describe the stultifying forms of liberalism that dominates the art world (as in canon-correction) and animates the politics of a large portion of recent paintings made of people.

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The problem of this idea of sameness as a weakened form of solidarity can also be found in the notion that friendship and affirmation is the root of a progressive politics, a quality that runs through much of TM Davy's work. My first encounter with Davy's paintings was through the screen of a friend's phone in New York. Visiting in early 2020, just before looking at art on screens would become the primary way it was viewed during the early phase of the pandemic, I was both amused and baffled by my friend's insistence that Davy's work was being championed within the New York art world, but they also explained that this was partly to do with the artist's circle of friends. I tried to check my response to these sentimental portraits, paintings of horses and beach scenes, questioning my immediate distaste. One of his series shows a single figure or couple holding candles in a darkened space, providing a kind of turbo-charged chiaroscuro. Other paintings show his subjects outside, frolicking in the ocean, lying on the beach, kissing, hugging. More recent works appeal to symbolism, mysticism and fantasy, including paintings of satyrs in forests and elves bearing candles whose psychedelic kitsch, I would argue, actually makes them more interesting. Often the paintings are portraits of Davy's friends/celebrities in the art world (Langberg makes an appearance, as does Wolfgang Tillmans). Animals are a recurring fixture, from monumental oil paintings of noble-looking horses on darkened backgrounds, to cats, dogs and bunnies rendered in smaller pictures on paper made with pastel and gouache. I have a note from that initial encounter, which reads 'This is what art history is afraid of. But it's also where identity becomes kitsch', two ideas which continue to inform my understanding of his paintings.

In the notion that this is what art history is afraid of, I mean the fact that this work has gained commercial, exhibition and some critical value despite an overt sentimentality and investment in virtuosity that connects Davy with the kind of values that more typically mark the success of populist painters such as Jack Vettriano. Davy's paintings displace the highbrow notions of 'good taste' that dominate art-historical understandings of style, in the form of continued investments in pared-back, minimal aesthetics as well as the avoidance of sentiment and perhaps even of pleasure. On paper, these sound like good reasons to like Davy's work for the way that it demolishes the pretensions of the critical and art-historical establishment towards critical 'distance'. Strangely, however, the work does not seek to operate at a distance from the establishment, but rather embraces academic conventions of painterly mastery and the influencer-adjacent machinations of the mainstream art world. Its appeal is less to the lowbrow, camp, kitsch and trashy, and more to middlebrow sensibilities and tastes. Moreover, the public display of friendship and intimacy seems less a radical queering of the family, and more a showcasing of a quasi-public-facing 'scene'. If the work of Davy, Fratino, Langberg and others has repeatedly been grouped together, I want to suggest here that this should be understood not only through their shared investment in technique, subject matter and recycling of historical styles, but also because their work offers no view of life that isn't affirmative and based on recognition. In this, it becomes hard to disentangle their practice from mainstream representations of the successful individual as one who is self-realised and recognised by society; notions underpinned by property ownership both historically and today.

In thinking about this subject, I have frequently returned to a quote from Philip Guston: 'I see the studio as a court ... The act of painting is like a trial where all the roles are lived by one person. It's as if the painting has to prove its right to exist.' Dating to the period after Guston's own scandalous return to figuration in his 1970 exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, the court as a space of relentless injustice is perhaps an odd metaphor with which to justify the existence of a painting. Yet the idea of why an artwork needs to exist remains a question to explore, and perhaps the notion of proving its right to exist indicates the thought process and social commitment of the painter, over and above technical virtuosity, or an untrammelled access to the 'self'. This puts me in mind of Kerry James Marshall's statement that

'artworks are not mystical enchantments. I think of artworks as things you build', because building signals the importance of method and making. Or we could turn to Koether's description of how 'queer painting' and 'women painters' became her guide during painting's period of critical disfavour, and her explanation that her engagement with artists including Marsden Hartley, Pavel Tchelitchew and Georgia O'Keeffe was dismissed as kitsch but, as she explains, 'you start with Florine Stettheimer and you end up somewhere with Jack Smith and Mike Kelley'. Here, the homophobic and misogynistic 'fear of kitsch' is transparent, mapped on to the preservation of masculinity and the canon, and so engagement with those artists offers great potentiality in terms of where they lead you and the different stories that can be told through those practices. Koether's emphasis on how she moved between Stettheimer, Smith and Kelley indicates how her work occupies that 'thinking space' where the artist must make those connections - or builds a case, to return to Guston's metaphor of the court.

Among more recent painters who actively seek to plumb the unknowability of the other in ways that are more unsettling, or more adequate to the complexity of social relations (because, after all, this is what paintings of people lead us towards), I think of the late Noah Davis's painting *Bad Boy for Life*, 2007, which I saw on the same trip to New York during which I had the conversation about Davy. The painting shows a young black boy, perhaps nine or ten, held prone over a middle-aged black woman's lap, presumably a family member or a caregiver. The woman lacks a mouth, and her eyes stare intently back towards the viewer. Her hand is held aloft, presumably about to spank the boy. The scene takes place in a domestic interior, and to their right is an otherwise ordinary-looking lamp with a peculiarly artificial-looking neon green stand. The boy looks glassy eyed but is not overly distressed. His arms are held out straight, straining towards the floor. Over the woman's shoulder a painting hangs on the peach and beige striped wallpaper that looks a little like a reproduction of Claude Monet's *Haystacks*. The painting's title recalls P Diddy's 2001 hit of the same name, a humorous move that combines the punishment of a child with the bravado of the rapper during what was arguably the worst phase of his musical career.

Another painting by Davis, *Untitled (Moses)*, 2010, shows a toddler,

perched in a sink with his back to the viewer. One foot is submerged in a pool of brownish water, the other bent precariously as the child makes his escape. The hand of a caregiver enters the frame of the painting from the right, reaching towards the child. Both these paintings show domestic scenes of intimacy, but in ways that emphasise the complexity of dependency, love and relationships. Violence hovers at the edge but is treated with a kind of humour and casualness rather than tragedy, not least through the titles of Davis's works. A baby bathing in a sink is a scene predisposed towards sentimentality, but none is present here. The title - *Moses* - connects this scene with something bigger: the sink becomes the metaphorical basket, the peril of the journey down the river is now just the danger of a toddler slipping in the sink, again playing with the scale of the scene in terms of its meaning.

Two 2020 paintings by Hamishi Farah also come to mind, namely *Joey* and *Matthew*, which depict two white American men who were arrested in Carroll, Iowa, after attempting a burglary and whose attempt at disguise was captured in their mugshots, which formed the basis for Farah's paintings (both had scrawled marker pen on their faces, Joey creating a scribbly beard and Matthew having drawn on a mask). Painted in acrylics and permanent marker on linen, like Farah's more well-known work *Arlo*, 2018, which depicted Dana Schutz's son, the portraits have an acerbic quality to them. Yet because each painting prompts the viewer to puzzle at their meaning, the high stakes involved in the representation of people are addressed in ways that are neither moralising nor do they rest on any shock value. Both Davis and Farah ludically layer up their paintings with references, but in ways that are distinct from the ironising, distanced tendencies of network painting and, because there is a kind of urgency in the scenes' subject matter, the viewer is pushed towards a thinking space, rather than what Theodor Adorno described as a 'culinary consumption' - that is, the avoidance of anything but experiences of pleasure which reaffirm the individual.

How this 'return to figuration' will be historicised in years to come is yet to be seen, but one would expect a more urgent set of questions to emerge from the intensive painting of people during a period when the politics of representation have never been so high. Perhaps the strangest aspect of this recent history is that we may have seen the most widespread and visible 'return to figuration' after abstraction yet, but without much debate over its stakes. I have said little about the machinations of the art market here but, in closing, it cannot be avoided. The proximity of artists and the market is closer than ever, and, while some of the figurative painters of the past worked with that genre in explicitly politicised terms, now that work has made its way towards mainstream success, as in the case of Neel, White and Wong, to name but a few. And artists who take up similar subject matter in terms of a politicised engagement with realism and representation, such as Casteel and Eisenmann, are readily welcomed by the market and arts' institutions, despite their work engaging in the representation of people in pictures who continue to be marginalised in the everyday workings of those establishments. There lies the contradiction, and while I don't want to end with a crude take about recuperation and representation, it is hard to avoid. Simply put, this isn't an argument against representation, but a note of scepticism about what hyper-visibility in the present means, when few of the institutions organising 'success' have changed.

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ARTFORUM



Hamishi Farah, *Ostentatio Vulnerum*, 2021, oil on linen, 43 1/4 × 34 1/2".

Hamishi Farah

FRI ART

In late July 1609, *Sea Venture*, an English ship transporting colonists to the New World on her maiden voyage, was steered into a coral reef in the aftermath of a tempest, just days away from her destination of Jamestown, Virginia. Somehow, all 150 passengers survived, inadvertently settling Bermuda as they waded to shore. Among them was a dog, the ship's mascot, which, according to the press release for this exhibition, later became a symbol of collective resistance against the Virginia Company (a corporate entity seeking to establish settlements on the coast of North America) and thus, too, an emblem of the settlers' preference for life on the uninhabited archipelago over that in Jamestown, where only chaos, disease, and starvation awaited them.

Directly by the entryway to Hamishi Farah's debut institutional solo exhibition, "Dog Heaven 2: How Sweet the Wound of Jesus Tastes," was *Dog Heaven*, 2015, a shallow fountain sculpture, bearing a canine head and tail and set atop a wooden table, which spouts a modest stream of local tap and so-called international waters. First shown at Mon Chéri, Brussels, six years earlier—in a presentation to which this exhibition functions as a sequel—the work serves as an homage to the unnamed hound and is accompanied by three wall-mounted legal documents: application papers for the animal's importation into Bermuda, retroactively filed.

Farah's ongoing scrutiny of racialism was pursued here through an eschatological allegory for the repercussions of forced moral subjecthood. The artist identifies the perverse contemporary fascination with imagery of suffering by positioning various depictions of the Passion, all made with reference to classical to early-modern devotional paintings and sculptures of Christ, in close proximity to portraits of human and nonhuman subjects facing uncertain fates, including, often enough, martyrdom. On an otherwise empty wall, *Crucifix*, 2021, containing a spectral outline of Christ's languid corpse, was hung beside Farah's notorious yet tender *Representation of Arlo*, a 2018 portrait of artist Dana Schutz's son made in response to Schutz's *Open Casket*, 2016, depicting the corpse of murdered fourteen-year-old African American Emmett Till. In *Ostentatio Vulnerum*, 2021, which Farah confessed to finishing only after the show had opened, sneaking into the Kunsthalle at night to add layers of pigment, Christ appears tortured and dolorous, his pallid skin flaking off to reveal patches of red flesh—a miserable, stark image when viewed opposite *Black Lena Dunham*, 2020, which references a paparazzi image of the eponymous white American actress but is painted so that she appears as if originally photographed in full blackface, smiling coyly.

Farah extended their ongoing concerns with refusal and scrutiny here. In *Ghost Descending a Staircase*, 2021, a monochromatic work of citrine-colored acrylic and pumice on linen, a disembodied aura descends a heavenly staircase; in *Spider Under Glass*, 2021, a brown arachnid is crudely imprisoned in an upturned glass. Above the latter whirled *Spinning Around*, 2021, a wooden crucifix purchased through a Swiss classified-ad website and attached to the rotating mechanism of a ceiling fan. Keenly aware that the charm of humor lies not just in being funny, but in its suggestion of the absurd, Farah used playfully cynical representational proxies to move toward the Afropessimistic logic that Christ, too, was Black. How else could his subjects so gleefully reinvoke his lynching in order to stoke their faith?

In spite of Farah's derision, "Dog Heaven 2" served as a crucial meeting point for Black art workers in and around Switzerland. Eager to nurture a local discourse on the limitations of representation, curator Mohamed Almusibli commissioned two addenda to the exhibition: *Window Seat*, 2021, an audiovisual installation by Alfatih and Soraya Lutangu Bonaventure in response to Farah's paintings, and an informal workshop, Critique & Care, initiated and organized by artist and curator Deborah Joyce Holman, at which Black art workers could exchange concerns, advice, and feedback among peers.

Farah offers a critique, through refusal, of the libidinal obsession with Blackness. By neglecting to paint a "real" Black subject, Farah narrowly avoids the humiliation of representation. Instead, they set their terms of engagement through a play of substitutions.

— *Olamiju Fajemisin*

Flash Art

2 Hamishi Farah “Antagoni” Château Shatto, Los Angeles by Franklin Melendez

Hamishi Farah's first solo exhibition at Château Shatto, "Antagoni," cleverly hijacks the banal mores of portraiture to delightfully nihilistic ends. Six of the works on view depict closely cropped figures whose faces are paradoxically both obscured and made all the more visible by various types of coverings or markings. These include *Joey* (all works 2020), a mugshot-esque snap of a white, blue-eyed adolescent with marker scribbled over his face. This is rendered in Mr. Farah's signature fluttery brushwork – a type of mock, post-impressionistic looseness that insists on the surface of the painting rather than indulging in illusionistic depth; it also cuts through any preciousness, giving the compositions a slightly informal air. That much is evident in *Argyria Blue* (*The Ghost of Paul Karason*), a seemingly absurdist splice of Santa Claus and Violet Beaugarde. A quick web search, however, identifies the namesake phantom as the real-life Oregon native who suffered from a rare type of silver poisoning that tinted his dermis into Smurfian splendor and launched him into minor Internet fame. He is flanked by *After Vidaperfect*, *Gogograham* and *Marykang*, an uncharacteristically solemn, almost devotional depiction of a veiled icon based on a backstage snap at fashion label Gogo Graham's AW20 runway show. Between these two enigmas protrudes a close-up of a hornet whose



distorted, fisheye lens effect gives the inhuman eyes a slightly quizzical expression as they gaze upon this disparate cast of characters. Juxtaposed against the paintings is a grouping of more cohesive black-and-white charcoal drawings: self-portraits commissioned from Rachel Dolezal, the controversial figure who achieved her "trans-racial" passing through a series of calculated surface signifiers. These are on display in her allegorical compositions – radical acts of self-fashioning narrativized into concise, pictorial psychodramas such as *Drowning* (all works 2020), which captures her struggle against an unseen undertow just beyond the reach of attendant dolphins; or the more serene *Nkechi*, an idyllic rendering of her facial features titled after the popular Igbo language name meaning "gift of god." It is worth noting that initially these commissioned works were intended to be shown as "readymades" over which Farah would claim authorship (think *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) pitted against the flimsy fantasy of a "post-racial America"). The pieces were ordered through Dolezal's Instagram art platform but would be signed by Farah, a gesture that invariably led to a dispute between the two parties, with accusations of overreach, unlawful appropriation, and the willful coopting of Dolezal's artistic identity. If we let that sink in for a minute, the puncheon basically writes itself, but it is worth unpacking the chiasmic beauty of the perceived violence of Farah's localized defacement as it comes up against Dolezal's more pervasive and much more corrosive violence in her performance of black face. And the joke doesn't stop there (although at that point it might stop being funny): more than a personal indictment against a single perpetrator, the juxtaposition between these two sets of images and their modes of production highlights the nefarious ways in which the medium of painting – and more specifically portraiture – is dependent on the circulation of so many extractable signs of "authenticity." In fact, these form the shining core of a currency that can be funneled, not unlike offshore assets, into various nefarious usages. These range from Dolezal's "problematic" conjuring of her inner biracial self, rendered most poignantly in a self-portrait holding a totemic black and white cookie (and topped off with a generic tribal head wrap) all the way to the whims of a gluttonous art market that indiscriminately devours certain modes of painting that, in the process, become stand-ins not just for monetary value but real lived experiences. The belief in this false equivalence bestows these pictures with almost talismanic properties, able to absolve its owner of any potential social sins. In light of this, a soaring auction premium seems like a small price to pay. What Farah makes aptly clear, however, is that, rather than diametrically opposed positions, these are all part and parcel of the same neoliberal endgame – something which, once glimpsed, like say the image of Nancy Pelosi kneeling in Ghanaian kente cloth, cannot be unseen.

← Rachel Dolezal, *Black & White Cookie*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 38.74 × 30.48 cm. Photography by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.
→ Hamishi Farah, *Now Then*, 2020. Detail. Acrylic and volcanic rock on linen. 76.2 × 94 cm. Photography by Ed Mumford. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

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artillery

Hamishi Farah

Chateau Shatto

by [Peter Brock](#) | Mar 9, 2021



Hamishi Farah, Joey (2020). Courtesy Chateau Shatto.

Portraiture is almost certainly the artistic genre in which power and privilege imprint themselves most legibly. To “represent” can mean to depict, but also the right to speak on behalf of a group. The tension between these two meanings is at the heart of Hamishi Farah’s debut solo show at Chateau Shatto. Two distinct groups of portraits make up this conceptually ambitious exhibition: oil paintings of people who have, by one means or another, altered their face, and five self-portraits in charcoal, pastel and acrylic commissioned from Rachel Dolezal. Farah’s approach prioritizes the referential capabilities of portraiture over formal innovation. These paintings point to compelling issues, but their pictorial language is conventional.

Two of Farah’s paintings depict white men who have drawn on their faces with a black marker. A man with a scruffy beard sports an amateurish version of a batman mask across his forehead, nose and cheeks, while a more youthful guy stares blankly towards the viewer with what looks like half-assed blackface. Both images feel like mugshots, evoking the specter of criminal archetypes. So-called “black” markers actually contain deep purple ink, and these racially-tinged facial alterations come off as unambiguously pathetic. However, these jagged purple lines are the most visually exciting parts of the paintings. Rendered with energetic brushstrokes into wet paint, these passages stand out from the static, at times stiff quality of portraits painted from photographs. Farah’s other paintings depart from this racial binary: a bearded man with entirely purple skin, a sumo wrestler wearing a sheet mask, a woman with her head covered by a stocking, and a closeup of a bee. These portraits add complexity and humor to the theme of self-presentation while sticking to a relatively conservative painterly technique.



Hamishi Farah, *Now Then* (2020). Courtesy Chateau Shatto.

Rachel Dolezal, whose claims of Blackness have been widely rebuked and ridiculed, makes self-portraits that are as strange as you would expect them to be. She deploys clumsy metaphors to emphasize her own victimhood and uses a Jewish cookie to claim bi-racial identity. *Black and White Cookie* (2020) portrays Dolezal in a black headwrap holding the titular cookie in front of her, having just taken a bite—you guessed it—right down the middle. I spent the most time looking at *Banished* (2020), a charcoal drawing that reads as a surrealist allegory for depression. It shows a somber Dolezal standing next to a fence with a large hole missing from her abdomen. A black sun the size of her missing section looms ominously above. These amateurish works are 'interesting', in that they ask you to look more as a sociologist or psychologist. As with some of Farah's own portraits, they illustrate how fixated humans can be on visual markers of identity, positing race as a particularly dangerous type of formalism.

Art in America

APPROPRIATION AND ANTAGONISM

By Travis Diehl February 2, 2021 1:03pm



What subjects are appropriate for which artists—and what is simply appropriation? For **Hamishi Farah**, portraiture rushes to the heart of the question. His exhibition “Antagoni,” at Château Shatto, includes five works (all 2020) made by the hand of **Rachel Dolezal**. In 2015, it emerged that Dolezal, whose parents are both white, had passed as Black for years, during which she earned an MFA from Howard University and briefly headed a chapter of the NAACP. Raked over in public opinion and shunned by activists, Dolezal has apparently retreated into art to express her trans-racial sense of self. In *Black & White Cookie*, she presents herself in a head wrap, holding a black-and-white cookie bitten at the midline. The painting is uncontrite; so are *Banished*, a standing self-portrait in charcoal, in which she appears with a hole drawn in her belly the same size and shape as the dense black sun pictured overhead, and *Drowning*, a self-portrait of the artist encircled by sharks. Farah had the gallery commission these pictures, and then—without Dolezal’s permission—countersigned each one, claiming them as readymades. In mid-December, Dolezal’s lawyer demanded that Farah’s signature be removed. The reasoning, however, reveals a pedestrian view of authorship: Dolezal wanted to ensure that potential buyers knew whom to contact for fresh commissions.

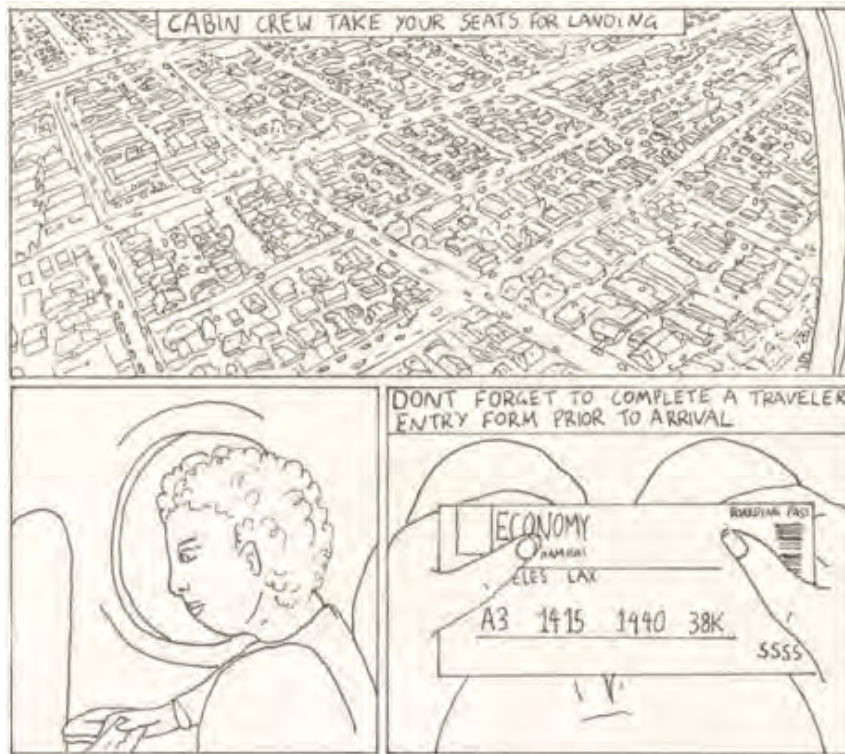
Another suite of six portraits, painted by Farah based on images pulled from the web, is just as fraught. *Joey* and *Matthew* portray figures in hapless blackface: mug shots of a pair of white burglars who drunkenly obscured their faces with Sharpie. *After Vidaperfect*, *Gogograham & Marykang* employs a backstage shot from the designer Gogo Graham’s FW20 runway show; it depicts a model masked by a taupe stocking, as if ready to burgle. These photos have their own ethics, but in appropriating or reproducing the image—as the photograph breaks into brushstrokes—the burden of representing iffy subjects shifts onto the painter. At the same time, Farah’s fidelity to his sources retains the idiosyncratic or idiotic ways each subject thwarts the black/ white binary. Weirdest and saddest is *Argyria Blue (The Ghost of Paul Karason)*, depicting a man whose ingestion of homemade colloidal silver turned his skin a weary navy, through the same chemical reaction underlying silver-based (indeed, black-and- white) photography. Karason spent a chunk of his final years homeless, shunned for the color of his skin. Each painting muddles ideas of facial recognition, race, and the Other; in contrast to the two-toned obsession behind Dolezal’s self-portraits, all but one of which are grayscale, Farah’s six emphasize the full visible spectrum.

Even so, Farah’s show also mocked the facile rainbow liberalism that doesn’t care if you’re Black or white, blue or green. *Untitled (Bee)*, sandwiched between *Argyria* and *After Vidaperfect*, is based on a photo that accompanied a Daily Mail article detailing how a wasp’s facial markings advertise its fighting prowess. Only racist pseudoscientists claim to predict aggressiveness, intelligence, or virility in the human species based on physiognomy. But Farah’s appropriation of Dolezal, her artwork and messy ethics both, neither absolves nor condemns her. Instead, “Antagoni”—a show with a title ambivalently shy of antagonism—envelops artist, subject, and viewer in a cascade of sticky interpreting and representing.

Farah has been here before. His painting *Representation of Arlo* (2018) pushed the controversy over the inclusion of Dana Schutz’s expressionist riff on the murdered Emmett Till in the 2017 Whitney Biennial in discomfiting, productive directions. Schutz maintained that her painting spoke to the sincere, universal empathy of motherhood; Farah duly based his on a photograph of Schutz’s son. Alas, critics took Farah’s gauzy, almost saccharine portrait of a white artist’s white son as an aggressive, even violent act. In other words, they reprised Schutz and her defenders’ failure to give painting its due alongside photography as a technology of race. “Antagoni” tests the same humanist tenet that my freedom ends where it restricts yours. Here, it holds. In “Antagoni,” there is another picture of a mother and child: *Motherhood*, by Rachel Dolezal.

TANK

CONVERSATION | Hamishi Farah



In 2016, Hamishi Farah, a Somali artist, writer and musician living in Australia, was detained at and eventually deported from LAX airport without explanation. Their new graphic novel *Airport Love Theme*, which inaugurates Book Works' Hannah Black-edited "Contact" series, mythologises this experience. In lurid and sharply funny scenes featuring salamanders, airport-cop erotic fiction and coked-up gallerists, Farah rips into the cruelties and basic absurdities that scaffold white fantasies of sovereignty and global mobility. In the wake of the book's release, Guy Mackinnon-Little spoke with Farah about comics and art-world hypocrisy.

You've just published a graphic novel *Airport Love Theme*. It's based on a true story. Could you briefly run through what happened?

I was travelling to New York in early 2016 for a solo exhibition, upon reaching LAX I was detained and sent back to Australia without given reason. I added the psychosexual love triangle to make it a better story.

The book's publication feels timely, with Kyle Chayka's [article deriding the "radicant" lifestyle of the art world](#) getting a fair amount of traction. What is your experience of these spaces more generally?

OK, I'm reading the article now. I think the critique of neoliberal borderlessness for a select few is valid, but it is short-sighted to localise it as an art world problem. As a whole, art's self-exculpating relation to critique is a tired, guilt-driven group narcissism that begins to read like disruption-centred constructive criticism for the saviour class. Another theme of the article that is consistent with my experiences in these spaces is the use of an abstracted global south's imminent abjection to invoke perspective for the privileged, perhaps analogous to the starving African children of the 1990s. It carries the sentiment that the art class can critique themselves out of their proximity to violence instead of using their positions of influence to achieve specific goals (direct action). Which has proven to be an effective tool, especially when the solidarity in direct action isn't reduced to some type of relational gesture that re-atomises the collective into individual actors. This is one of art's specialities.

I am also weary of romanticising regionalism as a knee jerk response to neoliberalism. This isn't an indictment of the author, but a reflection on whatever drives these kinds of takes. Whatever it may be it doesn't seem to be fuelled by a sincere attempt to mitigate harm, perhaps it is an expression of the groundlessness experienced under neoliberalism, or it could be guilt fatigue from this class's irreconcilable proximity to the violence experienced by the abstracted abject other. Maybe the desire for locality and re-emphasis on aristocratic affectations like taste is the desire for a decolonisation for white or white-striving people. I don't know, but if this consolidation occurred I presume people like me would be out of a career. Lol. But returning to the question, my experience of these spaces is not relating to the problems that these "radicans" seem to experience, and a suspicion that what they profess are not actually their problems.

I guess the irony is that in answering this way seems to be my performance of the same critique. I think the true irony is that in all of the self-reflection many non-black people are unable to see themselves. We are tired of participating in a conversation that is tethered to the unexaminable pathologies of mobility-oriented whiteness. But that's where our money comes from too.

Is the art fair itself much better than the airport?

That depends on which part of the airport you find yourself in.

You're best known as a painter. What about this experience called for a different medium?

I didn't go to university or undertake any formal study, I came from making zines and comics. So for me it is a return to a medium I loved and a chance to work in comics' longer form, which was something I had always hoped to do. I also think it's important to be aware of your imagined audiences and where they do and don't overlap, when you have simultaneous audiences (as many – especially non-white – artists strive for) you have to be saying two things at once, a kind of quantum, like dog whistling except without supremacy, I think this is the basis of magic.

On a more tactile level I know who can own my paintings, and usually they are not the people who might have to think about borders. I wanted to make something that the people I love can own, a lot of people I love couldn't care less about painting.



For a book based on what was presumably quite a traumatic ordeal, it is nevertheless extremely funny to read. Jokes are often a way to smooth over icky and uncomfortable situations, but yours – here and in many of your paintings – seem to do the opposite, favouring provocative incoherence over obvious punchlines. They remind me of [what the scholar Lauren Berlant has talked about as “humourless comedy”](#) or – “the sudden withdrawal of a cushion in a social relation”. How do you think about the role of humour (or its absence) in your work?

I don't know who Lauren Berlant is but I think humour is crucial to me, everything can be funny but it depends on who you are speaking to.

I hope the humour in the book is not incoherent but maybe incoherence is an important part of it. Ideally its role would be the absurdity of the encounter with power and its incoherence, and trusting that my audience understands and can relate. I think it brings people together, humour is the social relation or at least it is the one that matters.

OK, I just read a blurb of an interview with Lauren Berlant linking her argument of humourlessness to Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy, which Ahmed describes by saying "the person who names the problem becomes the problem. And if the person who names the problem is a kind of subject like a feminist, a person of colour, a politicised queer, or/and a trans person, the privileged devalue them because they're used to being deferred to and not tortured by a refusal of recognition".

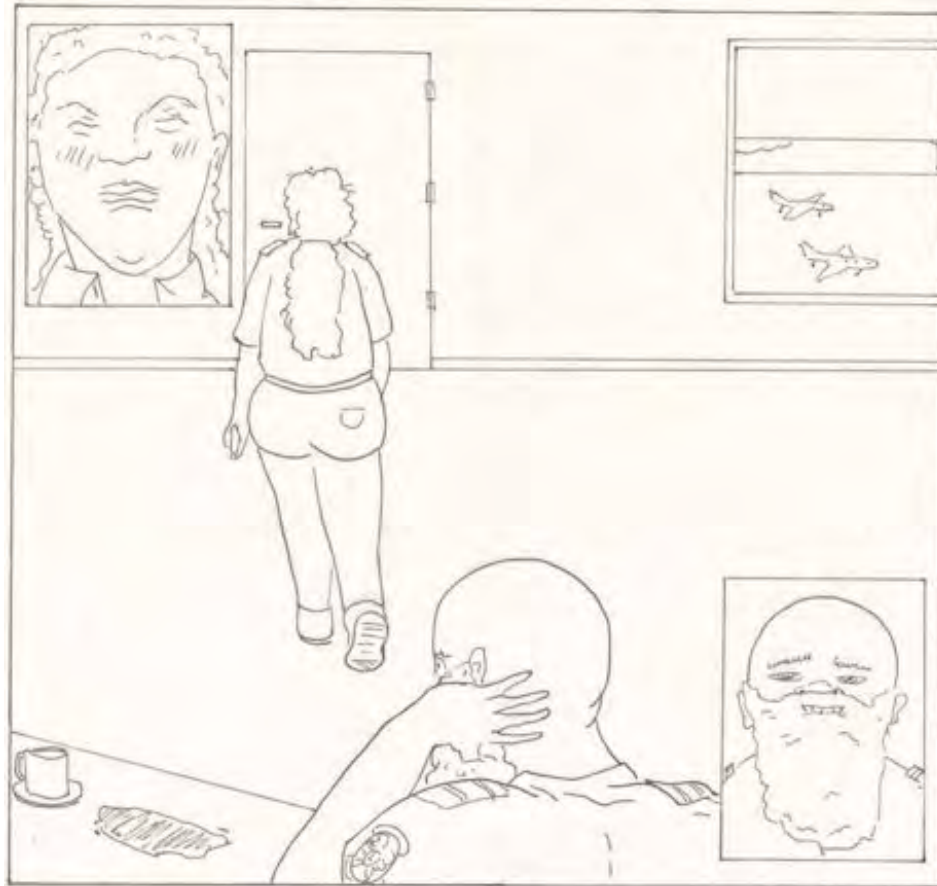
I think this relates to art's terminal relationship with critique. I wonder about serious art by marginal practitioners. In a video essay I made in 2014, I articulated marginal representation's non-consensual synonymy with institutional critique. Basically, I tried to argue that the institution of art posits marginal expression as critique (like Hennessy Youngman's "Slavery Flower") to reflexively correct itself in striving to obtain epistemic hegemony, or absolute violence. I am not so interested in addressing power, but I am aware that it will be forced upon me. In the best case humour is a way out of that relation and at least it can be an epistemic resource in spite of it.

Early on in the book, we meet another detainee caught with a bag of cocaine on his person. White (?) and seemingly unworried about the repercussions of what's going on, all he can talk about is how excited he is to recount the story later on. (I laughed at this part a lot as I've had this exact story forced on me at a party more than once.) Later, the main character receives an unsympathetic text from their gallerist – earlier seen snorting coke with collectors while extolling the character's marketability as a young, black, political artist – who also seems fixated on what a good story the whole thing is going to make.

Were you thinking about the contexts in which your story was likely to be sold on and circulated when putting the book together?

Haha yes Prateek "von" Das. He was actually South Asian, both as a character and in real life, but he is also an upper-caste Hindu so perhaps the way he carried himself wasn't too dissimilar to whiteness.

I am aware of the context my story might be sold on. After the situation first occurred, my friend Zac Segbedzi designed T-shirts to sell to raise money for my legal fees. There were Australian artists who seemed to be jealous of the attention the T-shirts received, as if they wished for something like this to happen to them so they too could narcissistically profit from an adverse experience in a neoliberal identity economy. I did not want the story itself to feel like it was trading in a kind of trauma economy, it isn't what makes a good story and would not be valuable to a large portion of the people I had hoped to speak with, many who have gone through similar or worse experiences. It also would probably be dull and even more embarrassing and not worth the amount of energy a graphic novel requires. This is one reason why I threaded the love triangle narrative into the story. I can't say the book itself will not trade in a neoliberal identity economy but this is something that will always be out of my (and other marginal practitioner's) hands (and perhaps unpopularly, it is important to state that it is an economy that does not exist to service marginal practitioners).



What's the weirdest way anyone has responded to your art?

I think it might be a tie between three different events.

In dealing with the horrific failure of the D*n* Sch*tz protest I painted a tender, cherubic image of her son. A popular German magazine who originally defended D*n*'s right to paint Emmett Till ran an article decrying my work and editing the image to censor the child's eyes.

For a comedy-themed offsite show in Melbourne I made a sculpture and painting that was a type of "hit list" of local white artists who had co-opted marginality to their own institutional advancement. I spent an hour of the opening consoling one white woman artist who was on the list, and receiving copious apologies. A few days later I was shocked to find out that she had retreated to a family property in the country because her life was at risk from my murderous intent!

I presented a work at a contemporary art institution in Melbourne, where I had installed fridges and other white goods that I had converted into galleries inside the director's office. I invited various curators to curate small shows inside the appliances. During the opening I was shocked to have the director (you guessed it) proclaiming loudly and in front of everyone that I must have stolen the fridges and am a criminal and a threat to the safety of everyone in the gallery! Luckily her staff had helped me acquire the fridges and had already attempted to inform her of their source in an unread email. ●

Hamishi Farah's *Airport Love Theme* is out with [Book Works](#).



CULTURE

hamishi farah's painting of dana schutz's son exposes the art world's white fragility

Presented at LISTE in Basel, the artist's response to Dana Schutz's Open Casket and the Whitney Biennial controversy, provokes a German magazine's ire.

BY HARRY BURKE AND WHITNEY MALLET

20.6.18

At LISTE, an art fair taking place each June in Basel, Switzerland, a delicate painting of a cherubic child riled up *Monopol Magazin*. The German art monthly published a short opinion piece on Hamishi Farah's *Representation of Arlo*, decrying the work, and censoring its subject by inserting a black bar across his eyes (later redacting the image altogether by replacing it with a generic shot of the former brewery where the art fair is held, out of respect for the privacy of the painting's subject). According to the magazine, the painting was not just "mediocre," but an overtly personal act of revenge.

The allegedly controversial detail about *Representation of Arlo* is that it depicts white artist Dana Schutz's young son. Hamishi found the reference photo for it online (a common strategy in his work). Schutz made headlines last year when her painting of Mamie Till's son, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black child lynched in Mississippi in 1955, was included in the Whitney Biennial, a prestigious showcase of emerging artists. Mamie Till famously let her son be shown to the world in an open casket; *Jet* magazine published a photograph of this that became a turning point in the struggle for civil rights. Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, which translates his brutally disfigured body into an abstracted, expressionistic vernacular, sparked protest. An [open letter](#) argued for its removal from the exhibition, and its destruction, emphasising that it's "not acceptable for a white person to transmute black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalised for a long time." Hamishi, like many black artists, co-signed the letter.

Representation of Arlo is, operatively, a response to Schutz's *Open Casket*. However, asserting that it's a simplistic reaction in a flattened visual field misses the painting's own important claims. [Defending her work](#), Schutz invoked her status as a mother, claiming the painting was a vehicle through which to empathise with another mother's pain. Motherhood is not a universal equilibrium -- the compassion of a white mother is incompatible with the pain of a black mother grieving her son's lynching. Neither is childhood. Under the white gaze, a blonde, white toddler is characterised as angelic, and a black boy stereotyped as threatening. *Representation of Arlo* emphasises this. It doesn't demonise Arlo, but portrays him with luminosity and lightness of touch, conveying careful consideration, and even tenderness -- far from the flat-footed revenge that *Monopol* makes it out to be.



Hamishi Farah, Ma

In their quickness to discount the work's complexity, *Monopol's* reaction demonstrates "white fragility", defined by educator Robin DiAngelo as the defensive moves made by white people when challenged racially, reinstating white racial equilibrium. It's when white people perform fragility to reinforce the hegemony of whiteness. With their dismissive attitude, the magazine attempted to deflect the important conversation about representation that Hamishi's work incites. Dana Schutz's defense of her own painting functioned similarly. Regardless of her intentions, the artist's evocation of motherhood betrayed a systemic anti-blackness, in which black experience is legitimised through white validation. Her response exhibited an inability to engage meaningfully in a conversation about race. Likewise, *Open Casket's* defenders, who supported the painting on the basis of "free speech," hypocritically used their argument to try and shut down the free speech of the painting's critics.

Hamishi's painting was shown at LISTE in a presentation that he co-curated with his gallery, *Arcadia Missa*. This featured portraits by four additional black artists, Janiva Ellis, Lewis Hammond, Ruth Ige, and Cheyenne Julien, whose work resists the white gaze, the social structure which perceives whiteness as normative and people of colour as "other." Hamishi's text introducing the presentation included a quote by artist Manuel Arturo Abreu: "All the west knows as 'art' since the Enlightenment is an ecology of criteria for inclusion which relies on the colonial subsumption of black and brown aesthetics." In the art fair's commercial context, the presentation rejected the usual fetishisation and commodification of the black body. It affirmed the complexity of black identity, and destabilised the power of the hegemonic white gaze.

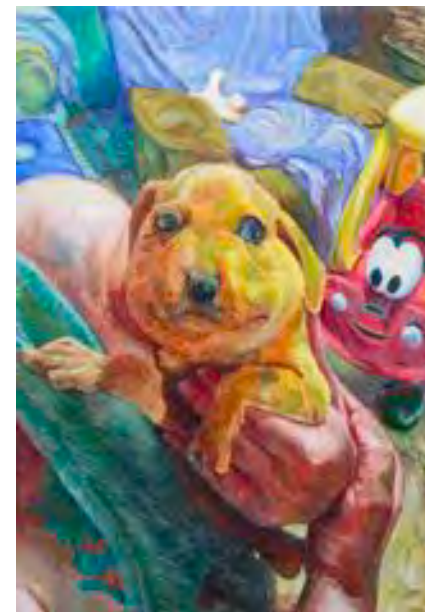
A second take on *Representation of Arlo*, published in *Hyperallergic*, stated that the artist is "working with the same tools afforded other artists, including Schutz." The white gaze, though a type of 'soft power', reiterates white supremacy, ambushing even those who disaffiliate with right wing racism. Shrewdly, Farah's painting leaves it to the viewer to distance themselves from the dominant gaze by uncoupling his work from Schutz's. It is antagonistic to, rather than compliant with, whiteness. More than a didactic retaliation using the same painterly toolkit, it points to entirely different conditions of viewership.

Presumably, this decentering of whiteness discomforted the editors of *Monopol*. They failed to mention the larger context that guided the exhibit, even though it provided a framework for how to read the paintings on display. They neglected to note that *Representation of Arlo* was shown alongside two other paintings by Hamishi: *Ma* (2017), a portrait of a middle-aged white woman from a viral YouTube video in which she spouts vitriolic racism, its title of course referencing motherhood, and a painting of a small dog held by white arms, *George* (2017).

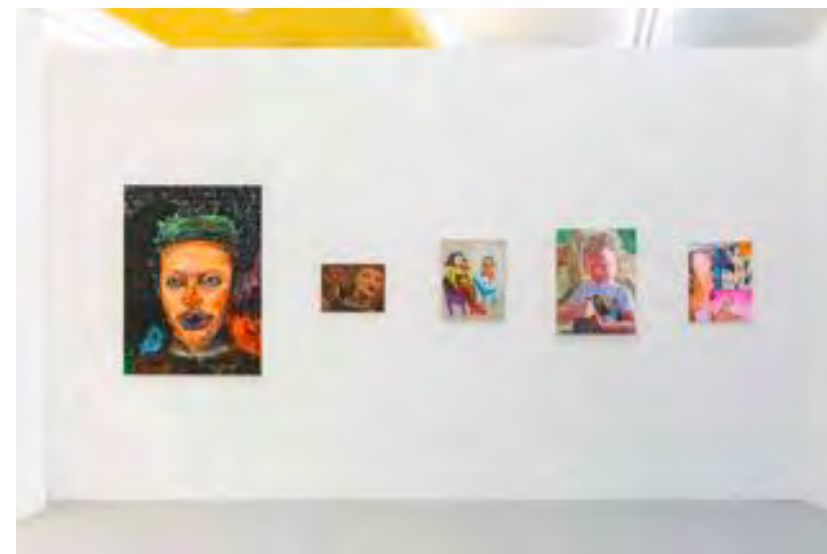
Monopol's reaction betrays the double standards of mainstream media. They violated Hamishi's painting by censoring Arlo's eyes (if only it was that easy to eradicate the white gaze). Yet art magazines reporting on the controversy around *Open Casket* had no problem reproducing Schutz's representation of Till, and images of black and brown children experiencing trauma are circulated in our media without permission all the time.

This double standard extends beyond the human realm. Despite the protests, the Whitney Museum left *Open Casket* in the Biennial. A few months later, in anticipation of the Guggenheim's survey exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, a petition argued that two works due to be included in the exhibition featured violence towards animals: in one video, this specifically concerned dogs. In the art world animal cruelty is treated as a more significant social issue than anti-black violence, something surely on the artist's mind when including *George*, his portrait of a dog stung by a bee (which again indexes an image sourced online), in his selection of works.

Monopol's article demonstrates that when you're accustomed to privilege, equality can feel like victimisation. Neither Arlo nor Dana Schutz may have given permission for the painting to be produced, but with its provocation, we are all being invited to divest from whiteness as a system of ownership and domination. *Representation of Arlo* is not an act of retribution, as alleged, but a gesture of a more equitable visual culture.



Hamishi Farah, *George*



HYPERALLERGIC

Opinion

A Portrait of Artist Dana Schutz's Son Reframes Issues of Consent and Appropriation

Hamishi Farah's portrait painting apparently based on a photo of Schutz's son was intended as a response to her controversial painting of Emmett Till, "Open Casket."

by Kealey Boyd
June 19, 2018



A toddler's haphazard curls and flush cheeks are captured in a sweet but banal painting on view at last week's LISTE art fair in Basel. The simplicity of the portrait, by artist Hamishi Farah, takes on new meaning when the title claims it. "Representation of Arlo" (2018) is a rendering of artist Dana Schutz's son and a response to her painting "Open Casket" (2016). "Open Casket" was based on a funeral photo of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was tortured and murdered by two white men in 1955. Allegedly based on a photo found on the internet, Farah's responsive work raises questions of consent — in historical and contemporary contexts — and whether the work is an appropriate reaction to Schutz's political painting.

What does it mean to paint another person without consent? Art historically, Farah occupies a crowded room of artists who have acted in a predatory manner, adopting images from both private and public spaces and sources. Walker Evans's *Subway Portraits* series is regarded as remarkable, despite the fact that he obtained those images by attaching a camera to his chest, lens peaking between coat buttons. If praising the images is considered an approval of the process, just moving through the world today provides consent for our likeness to appear in art production and be appropriated for public consumption and purchase. It is possible Farah found Arlo's image within a private social media account intended for an intimate community. Arne Svenson obtained images of his subjects without their knowledge while they were in their own homes in his *Neighbors* series. He was sued and emerged victorious, both in the courts and in his career, successfully exhibiting the photo series subsequently. Is "Representation of Arlo" different? (Svenson's series also included children, if the age of the subject is a point of contention.)

"The painting is very different from the photograph. I could never render the photograph ethically or emotionally," Schutz told artnet News in 2017, discussing the differences between the photographs of Till's open-casket funeral and her painting "Open Casket." Schutz's version of the photo includes a vermilion flower on a cummerbund and distinct brushstrokes in place of Till's viciously disfigured face. Following inquiries from Hyperallergic, Farah and his gallery Arcadia Missa did not elaborate on where the artist found the image of Schutz's son. Attempting to retrace Farah's digital steps and locate the original photo used for the painting, I found two blurry images of Arlo, neither matching Farah's painting. Perhaps, like Schutz, Farah did not copy a specific photo but synthesized and adapted several.

At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz' painting of Emmett Till: "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma." pic.twitter.com/C6x1JcbwRa

— Scott Y. (@hei_scott) March 17, 2017

In a *New York Times* interview, Schutz said,

I don't know what it is like to be black in America but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension. Their pain is your pain. My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother.

Working from an understanding that motherhood interrupts classifications of race, Farah could claim a similar structure, one of a son-to-son connection. By inhabiting that space, Farah can gauge who will come to whose aid and protection. Who will claim that someone's likeness is too sacred to reproduce or steal? In the same *Times* interview, Schutz added:

Art can be a space for empathy, a vehicle for connection. I don't believe that people can ever really know what it is like to be someone else (I will never know the fear that black parents may have) but neither are we all completely unknowable.

The claim is problematic because Schutz seeks to inhabit the grief of a black mother in the 1950s whose son was murdered without justice by painting from photos. It is a shallow entanglement for its creator, and Farah exposes that. In the spirit of bell hooks, Farah returns us to the question: for whose gaze is either painting intended?

In Schutz's defense of her work, she correctly acknowledged that the suffering experienced by Mamie Till has no boundary. Till bravely chose to show the public the brutality done to her 14-year-old child. The image of that pain cannot be decoupled from its context. Her act inspired other acts of resistance and garnered allies across racial divides. This visual call-and-response resonates across the decades and with artists today, reminding us of the potential terror of making and looking at images.

Based on the description of painting photos of a child from an arguably public space, without a parent's consent, in response to a politically charged event and presenting it in a contemporary art context, it would be hard to determine if I am referring to "Open Casket" or "Representation of Arlo." Like Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, Farah makes clear that author's intent is swiftly replaced by the reader's interpretation. Just as no text or painting is neutral, neither is the reader, and his or her social experiences will make meaning with the marks of class, gender, and race. If Schutz's goal was to express pain and empathy and give life to a conversation she perceived as relevant to a new context, Farah has aided her objective. Miraculously, Farah's Arlo reminds us of Till, the context, the pain, and the possibilities of meaning read by different "authors."

In Farah's video artwork "Marginal Aesthetics" (2014), each new incarnation of an image is said to replace the previous version, suggesting that the artist was conceptually thinking about the commodification of images and pain well before "Open Casket" was made. "Representation of Arlo" may be read as predatory or a spectacle, but he is working with the same tools afforded other artists, including Schutz. If art allows viewers and creators the opportunity to understand what it is like to step into another's shoes, Farah has made a pair that fits Schutz but is extremely uncomfortable.



Hamishi Farah, "Marginal Aesthetics" (2014) (screenshot via artist's website)

ARTSLANT

(IN)VISIBILITY IN NEW BLACK PORTRAITURE: ARIA DEAN AND HAMISHI FARAH IN DIALOGUE

In March 2016, Los Angeles-based artist and writer Aria Dean penned an essay entitled "Closing the Loop" for *The New Inquiry* about the white monopolization of feminist selfie art. I remember reading the essay and feeling its urgency and necessity at a time when the spotlight on selfie art and culture was (and still is) dominated by white cis-hetero young women. When I think of the canon of feminist art and the "trailblazers" that paved the way for subsequent generations of women artists, I see a very similar process of erasure repeating itself.

Women artists of color from the 1970s were sidelined by white feminism, or what is now known as the Feminist Avant-garde in art history, which is gently nestled under the more general but equally white-dominant umbrella of the women's liberation movement. Ana Mendieta's dissatisfaction with the movement, with groups like New York's white-centric A.L.R. collective, is well documented. As is the exclusion of black artists such as Dindga McCannon, Pat Davis, and Carol Blank from the "official" canon of Feminist Art in America from the 70s. These artists made independent efforts to be visible with the formation of the *Where We At* (WWA) organization following their 1971 exhibition "*Where We At*" *Black Women Artists: 1971*.

What fundamentally separates these groups today remains the same: artists of color have a shared activist focus on intersectional issues while white artists largely continue to prioritize their own privileged ones. There is no room for the "other" in history books and the heavy baggage that the "other" carries makes it difficult for marginalized artists to find the right language to speak it in. In the history of art and otherwise all the words belong to White Supremacy: all the pages of history have been written for and in favor of it. Finding one's non-white place within this history becomes a dexterous task that often entails feelings of complicity or guilt. When the extant systems for visibility are moderated, co-opted, and monetized by White Supremacy, it's no surprise that the terrain is difficult to navigate.



Aria Dean and Hamishi Farah, *White ppl think I'm radical*, Installation View at Arcadia Missi, London

It is in this vein that Aria Dean and Melbourne-based artist Hamishi Farah have worked somewhat allusively in a prefatory effort that seems to propose a definition for New Black Portraiture in art following Dean's 2016 posture. Their two-person exhibition, *White ppl think I'm radical* at London's *Arcadia Missi* (through April 29) presents an inclusive, more collective idea of self-portraiture. One where the black artist is simultaneously present and absent from the picture, where the self is at once he, she, and they—an outlook that contradicts western philosophy's emphasis on the ideologically capitalist individual.

I spoke with Dean and Farah on the occasion of the exhibition regarding the complicated nature of black portraiture today. In both the show and conversation, the two artists pass on proposing any explicit manifestos, instead choosing to work within a cogitative grey area that isn't as totalizing or burdensome. They give themselves the necessary space to move boundlessly between the intersections and problematics of image and representation.

In the exhibition Dean presents two self-produced photographs: one of herself and the other of a woman named Aallyah Wright with whom she collaborated to make *Wata*, a video of the Yazoo River in Mississippi, where Dean's grandfather was from and where Wright currently resides. Dean found, contacted, and commissioned Wright via Facebook to create the video, saying of Wright, "She and I are interchangeable, you can't see our faces." She describes them as "blurred out in a way that is a shout out to police footage or CCTV-type surveillance, which perhaps [also] makes us interchangeable with the larger ecosystem of images of black femmes."



Aria Dean & Aallyah Wright, *Wishi (Yaroo, MS)*. Courtesy the Artists & Arcadia Missa. Photo: Tim Bowditch

Dean has a specific interest in “the problems and violences” of portraiture. It is the first time she has ever shown an image of a human body. She is largely against representation in her work, preferring abstraction if she senses her art will be evaluated by placing her identity on a binary or spectrum. “I wanted to do violence to portraiture here, in a rather timid way,” she says, “I guess I’m often trying to find that sweet spot between refusal of the figurative image and an artistic program of representation à la Kerry James Marshall or Mickalene Thomas.” Dean views the video “as a portrait of Aallyah,” but playfully asks: “Can seeing through someone’s eyes become a portrait of them...or myself?”

Situated next to Farah’s self-portraits in the exhibition, a coded visual language begins to emerge with both artists presenting themselves by proxy. None of Farah’s paintings include physical or literal representations of him. In terms of portraiture Farah likes to think about “double consciousness, the white gaze and [Frantz] Fanon’s ontology of blackness.” He doesn’t consider the theories themselves, but “the lived experiences of them.”

He explains:

I approach it this way because my experience of myself in art is very much through how I am seen [by white people]. Even an understanding of my own blackness very much came about through its forced opposition to whiteness. In terms of the portraits, you could think of it as a reclamation [of] my inner ontological life through a black gaze—that is, one

that is aware of how it is viewed by whiteness. I think this is very reductive and annoys white people—as it should. I believe white ontological life is entirely rooted in or based on anti-blackness so perhaps I am also contesting Fanon’s own euro-centrism.



Hamishi Farah, *Photographer*. Courtesy the Artists & Arcadia Missa. Photo: Tim Bowditch

Farah describes a painting he made of a widely circulated photo of Kanye West’s first public appearance after being hospitalized, where he is walking out of Trump Tower after meeting with the then President-elect. The artist differentiates it from his other works:

I am always hesitant to represent black people...I identify a lot with Kanye, especially in his problem-ness and the way he wields it, but also in his misery in white spaces and obsessiveness. I think a lot of black men do. I can't think of many black men whose audience has such an ubiquitous and violent understanding of the intricacies and contradictions of public black masculinity. His representation might be able to stand in for that alone, and perhaps contextualize some of the other self-portraits.

Both artists expressed difficulty in choosing how to represent themselves while maintaining a certain secrecy about the work in an effort to protect it and themselves. There is an inherent relationship between representation and secrecy when there are so many contradictions and violence in black portraiture. When presenting yourself from a marginalized position, there can be a lot of power in remaining invisible in public. If you make yourself visible, you risk giving yourself away to more violence, exploitation, and nonconsensual erasure, the Arcadia Missa collaboration



Haniishi Farah, *George*. Courtesy the Artist & Arcadia Missa. Photo: Tim Bowditch

seems to say. Finding a healthy balance is hard. Marginalized groups have been violated on so many levels and yet often still need to pander to a white market in order to speak to other marginalized groups and survive.

"The remaining invisible thing is such a conundrum," says Farah. He continues:

Western art is like a history of blowing off black art as white genius. This makes it interesting to think about why so many black artists gravitate towards performance and music. Sometimes all we have is to use that hypervisibility. A lot of the black artists I know are so much more visible than they get paid for. Same goes with viral blackness. Last year I made a painting of this person, Aallyah, who punched this white girl [who had called her the n-word], hoping that when it sells I can send her a stack or two—kind of as a "blacceleration" or "reparative blacktialism," trying to use the violent gaze to make sure niggas get paid.

Dean also grapples with the tensions between the power of invisibility and the simultaneous importance of proliferation. She paraphrases New York-based artist and critic Lorraine O'Grady from a conversation she organized between O'Grady and New York-based artist and writer Juliana Huxtable last year:

When your subject matter is so big and cumbersome as blackness then you may feel compelled to attack it from all sides. Black artists have to have the tightest fucking program of attack: writing, performing, making objects, music, etc. I think this is part of why David Hammons is so fucking cool, because somehow he sort of doesn't give into the compulsion to arrive with a thesis, you know? Like he keeps the mystery.

Lorraine and Juliana both felt like the body was really important because we can't do away with aberrant bodies before they've been come to terms with. They talked about the funny timeline where various western philosophical and theoretical trends arrive to conveniently do away with "the body" or "the author" at moments when marginalized people are making themselves heard more loudly. Which I agree with but I think I'm really preoccupied with the ontology of blackness when it comes to representation—it's so messy. Blackness doesn't precede the image really and that seems like a really difficult thing to grapple with when you're working with images, or yourself as image in performance.

Dean laughs and continues:

I think it is important to represent yourself, but my big thing is that politics of representation and theories of representation that were devised, let's say circa 1970, just don't work when your image can be ripped and bounced across the internet. It stresses me out so much. Because like—and this is what I was whining about in that selfie article—I really don't care very much about selfie artists. A lot of the theories of the body and the image that artists reference just don't fit; it's all wonky. And my whole thing is that

image that artists reference just don't fit; it's all wonky. And my whole thing is that critically looking at the (non) ontology of blackness, black theory, black art, black everything can teach us so much about confronting a body and a life that is so so entangled with images.



Aziz Dhan and Haniyah Paroh, *White ppl think I'm radical*, Installation View at Arcadia Missa, London

Farah adds:

I think it is important to note something about the politicization of aesthetics and that aesthetics in "the commons" are traditionally an anti-black battleground or colonial frontier. What happens when pro-blackness is subsumed into an aesthetic turnstile? I think the black NFL players who won the Superbowl understand this and I support their boycott [of visiting the White House]. I think black critics of Obama also understand this. This is part of the difficulty of even participating in an art dialogue, whether it be institutional spaces or not. I just got the news that I'm now represented by two amazing

galleries, I love the people who run them and this is definitely about my survival. But it's hard to be happy about it until I actually do something with that survival and those resources. I see contributing to "art" (in opposition to using art and its culture, agency, and resources as a tool) as being a snitch.

White ppl think I'm radical continues at Arcadia Missa, London, through April 29.

—Audrey L. Phillips

Audrey Phillips is a Toronto-based writer. She is a regular contributor to AQNB.

CONTRIBUTOR

10 Outstanding Solo Exhibitions to Experience in London in April

By [MutualArt](#), Contributor

World's largest online art information service

Apr 7, 2017, 12:54 AM EDT

Springtime in London: the sun has finally decided to show its face, so we've been wandering through Mayfair, poking around Peckham, and scoping out the East End, checking in with the gallery scene. Here are 10 solo and two-person exhibitions that have us talking, featuring photography, painting, video, immersive installations, feature films, and assemblages, from young, emerging artists, to established greats.



White ppl think I'm radical, Installation View. Arcadia Missa, London. Courtesy the Artists & Arcadia Missa, Photo: Tim Bowditch.

[Hamishi Farah & Aria Dean: White ppl think I'm radical](#)

Arcadia Missa, 18 February – 29 April 2017

A timely counterpoint to the [Dana Schutz](#) controversy, Los Angeles-based [Aria Dean](#) and Melbourne-based [Hamishi Farah](#)'s exhibition-as-dialogue confronts "the problems, possibilities, and violences of portraiture," revealing multiple tensions and issues surrounding the representation of blackness. As such, these portraits appear abstracted, diverted, and coded, looking for "that sweet spot between refusal of the figurative image and an artistic program of representation," [as Dean says](#).



How New Zealand's Millennial Artists are Confronting Generational Stigma

Are millennials equally lost and lamentable the world over? A recent trio of forward-looking exhibitions in New Zealand suggests that youth remains a truly international—and consistently problematic—art-world obsession.

By [Lana Lopesi](#)

20 September 2017, 7:30pm

"We can all agree that millennials are the worst." So begins a recent article in *The Wire*, giving unabashed voice to a sentiment that, justified or not, is widely shared. Composed—according to William Strauss and Neil Howe's generational theory—of those born between 1982 and 2004, this much-maligned group is characterized by its witnessing of transformative advances in technology. And in their 2009 book *Millennials Rising*, Strauss and Howe also tag its members as "special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving." It's not difficult to see how this awkward mix of attributes might rub Generation X-ers, and the baby boomers that preceded them, the wrong way. The terms are generalizations, of course, but the term—here as elsewhere—has stuck.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the conversation around millennials has been a highly particular one, powerfully influenced by neighboring Australia. In a notorious television interview for *60 Minutes Australia*, luxury property developer Tim Gurner (a millennial himself) accused his peers of throwing away their money on overpriced avocado toast, a decadent taste which he suggested was leading directly to their inability to climb the property ladder. Across the ditch, New Zealand is in the midst of a housing crisis; Auckland is now the world's fourth most expensive city for homeownership, with the median price for a house a cool million New Zealand dollars (upwards of \$700,000 USD).

Of course, local media jumped on the avocado comment, castigating millennials for their profligacy and overlooking such major problems as inadequate urban planning and extant economic turmoil—not to mention the lack of foresight exhibited, arguably, by previous generations. The media thrives on labeling people, but so does the art world. Over the past year in Aotearoa New Zealand, we've seen curators jump aboard the millennial gravy train, with a number of recent exhibitions seeking to define how the generation's art looks and feels. The first of these was last fall's *New Perspectives* (September 23–October 29, 2016) at Auckland not-for-profit Artspace, which trumpeted the ambitious, albeit nebulous, intention to "distill a panoramic picture of young artistic research and production in Aotearoa." The 21 artists were selected by the gallery's curatorial team of John Mutambu and Misal Adnan Yıldız with help from Simon Denny, through an open call that attracted 120 proposals. Denny, a New Zealand artist currently based in Berlin, was the country's representative at the 2015 Venice Biennale. He's also, along with Mutambu, a millennial.

New Perspectives was, perhaps predictably, overwhelming, and pushed the gallery's physical capacity to its limits. But it was astutely considered, too. *Metro Magazine* critic Anthony Byrt opined that it showed "just how dangerous and pointless it is to tar an entire generation with a single, vicious brush. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, it also makes a bold generational statement." What show and critic alike attempted to survey was how young New Zealand artists were responding to the uncertain state of the wider world. And since the exhibition wrapped, the divisive politics that were beginning to erupt at the time have now surfaced fully; we're in a post-Trump, post-Brexit world teetering on the brink of nuclear conflict. And while we've been to similar places before, the key distinction this time around is the dominance of the Internet. Technological advances have, selectively, democratized space and information, providing a platform to those who were once denied a voice. With the rise in white supremacy and other forms of intolerance, we're also seeing the discourse around people of color, indigenous populations, and LGBTQI rights attaining new visibility.

Unlike *New Perspectives*, *The Tomorrow People* at the Adam Art Gallery in New Zealand's capital, Wellington (July 22–October 1, 2017) benefits from the political changes that occurred in the intervening nine months, focusing on emergent artists who offer "urgent, resourceful, and playful possibilities for navigating troubling times." With a similarly large number of participants—25—the exhibition, curated by Christina Barton, Stephen Cleland, and Simon Gennard, does what the title suggests, looking to define the interests of a rising generation, but through a more traditional curatorial model. The show's problem is that, in spite of some of its organizers' youth, it reads as a cherry-picking exercise, speaking *for* artists and striving to fit them into an extant thesis rather than working *with* them to amplify their own visions. Thus it falls on the sword of its own curiosity, any sense of curatorial urgency appearing entirely absent. This unfortunate condition is emphasized by the fact that, as Chloe Geoghegan points out in a review for *The Pantograph Punch*, six *New Perspectives* artists also appear in *The Tomorrow People*—some with the same works.

If we accept the stated interest of *The Tomorrow People* in "navigating troubling times" as common to much current practice, then few artists are better qualified to offer an opinion than Melbourne-based Hamishi Farah. In April 2016, the 25-year-old garnered international media attention while en route from Melbourne to the NADA art fair in New York. Having travelled under the waiver scheme that allows people from member countries such as Australia to stay in the US for up to 90 days without a visa, Farah—an Australian citizen of Somali heritage—was fingerprinted and had his passport and phone confiscated before being handcuffed to the wall of a cell for some 13 hours, eventually being deported without explanation. Farah was interrogated by guards who asked him, bizarrely, whether he was able to produce art without the aid of drugs. "I was mocked by them for being an artist when I tried to explain my story," Farah told Australian daily *The Age*. "They called me an idiot and a prima donna."

This experience of racial profiling certainly ties in with the aforementioned notion of urgency; so did another exhibition at Artspace, *Dirt Future* (August 4–September 2, 2017), in which Farah also took part. As the gallery's artist in residence, he worked with seven young artists in a mentorship role to confront the question of who speaks for whom. Markedly different from the two previous examples, the resultant show enjoyed further millennial support in the shape of Artspace staffers Bridget Riggir-Cuddy and Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua. The selected "verging on emerging" artists worked with the institution's team on the allocation of time and money, without specific formal expectations. They went on excursions, invested in self-care, and spent as little or as much time at the gallery as they liked. The exhibition that they ultimately assembled was devoted to "undoing the colonial endeavor," "bearing witness to histories that manifest through the body," and exploring "the trace of violence as found through self-sovereignty."

Of these three exhibitions, it was, ironically, *Dirt Future* that had the strongest premise. And since its curatorial decisions were made collaboratively, the result at least appeared to express a unified millennial position. While not framed publicly as a "new artists show," its emphasis was on the ongoing investment in its participants, an approach that transcended mere institutional critique to establish a new model, a real attempt at sovereignty by and for a new generation. One result of current political volatility is emboldened artistic practice, in which irony and ambiguity have surrendered ground to more direct strategies. Perhaps painting a generation in broad strokes when it labors under such a heavy inherited social burden, and remains in such a vulnerable position, is counterproductive. Why don't we just let it work? [Lana Lopesi](#) is a writer based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa New Zealand. She is Editor-in-Chief of [The Pantograph Punch](#) and Contributing Editor for [Design Assembly](#).

DAZED

These young artists are putting Africa on the art world map

Meet the continent's up-and-coming creatives who fearlessly harness the web to tell their stories

15th October 2015
Text [Monique Todd](#)

Until October 18, Somerset House will play host to [1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair](#), a platform championing the diversity of contemporary art produced across the continent. Now in its third year, it's a must see during [Frieze week](#), where exhibitors hail from Morocco, Angola, Tunisia, Benin and Kenya, to name a few. In support of this important showcase, we cast a light on young African diasporan digital artists, as well as emerging digital art practitioners who are from and/or currently based in Africa. Using screen interfaces and web-based media, these young artists fearlessly evaluate and challenge notions of identity, colonialism, representation and appropriation with nuance and flair.



Wifi Poem, 2015, Hamishi Farah via ofluxo.net

HAMISHI FARAH

“1 who let/ 2 the hood/ 3 into/ 4 the/ 5 gallery” – reads each of the five network options that audiences can choose from when connecting their smart phone to [Farah's](#) installation, named ‘Wifi poem’. The Somali-Australian decodes and recodes cultural signifiers, fusing URL and IRL mediums to probe at ‘western culture’ and the colonial/appropriative layers within that concept. His recent solo exhibition at Brussel's [MON CHÉRI](#), Jailbait (For Us By Us), is emblematic of his approach – using coded objects like Uniqlo Leggings and International water to survey racism in consumerist contexts.

ARTSPACE

HAMISHI FARAH
Minerva (Sydney)
\$9,000

Here's Every Painting You Need to See at NADA
New York 2016

By [Andrew M. Goldstein](#)

MAY 6, 2016

The proverbial cat that gets skinned a new way every day, fresh-to-market paintings provide a snapshot of the languages artists are using, the stances they're taking, and the places they're looking—making them a good section of the art market to drop a dipstick and see what comes up. Here, from the sexy to the sophisticated, the paranoid to the playful, here is a broad range of our favorite paintings (with, yes, lots of figuration) that you can buy right now at [NADA New York](#).

The Somali-Australian artist Hamishi Farah (who was turned back at the U.S. border and prevented from attending the fair) tries to reclaim art history, since he doesn't see himself represented in the canon, in throwback paintings like this one that depicts a fight between two girls that was captured on a smartphone and made viral online, presented in a bucolic setting bracketed by a giant pigeon.



CAIRO CLARKE

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Exploring race and representation through different modes of portraiture, Aria Dean and Hamishi Farah's individual works come together to create a new form of representational economy – a shared search for what is (un)representable and how (not) to represent it, a critique on fine art and representation. The title of the exhibition alone 'White ppl think I'm radical' acts as a vehicle for which their different approaches, mediums and concerns into the connectedness of diasporic blackness exist together.

This connected diaspora exists for both Dean and Farah not only here and now at Arcadia Missa's Peckham space, but rhizomatically, as friends; located across continents, as artists, and individuals. Dean's sculptural and digital works render the body and history of the problem. Representable or not Dean questions the differences between portrait and representation, and whether one is more real than the other? *A Regular Thing* (2017), a line of seven burnt vests on hangers eerily, yet cleverly gesture towards this. Visually and materially the sculptural work depicts representations of blackness, the white vest, black masculinity combined with burnt out holes and candlewax - violence, brutality, vulnerability. Scattered below this piece and around the space *war of position* (2017) cotton lathered in thick black latex gloss paint forms delicate roses, conjuring a stunning and powerful portrait of that which is left behind.

In turn, the works become a portrait of Dean without placing herself visually in the work, but working collectively as cues and gestures. Dean acknowledges the power of perception and position in both titles, and the works, modifying the conventions of portraiture, and reflecting concerns regarding who is/isn't represented in contemporary culture. The tension between 'real' and representation continues with two digital photographs of Aria and her collaborator Aallyah Wright hanging side by side. Their faces blurred out resembling police footage teeters between proxy and portrait.

Portraiture historically has been used as a means of legitimising prominent voices. Visibility is a concern attached to both Dean and Hamishi's work. Fetishisation of the image is often a risk of increased representational visibility as well as the shared anxiety amongst POC of the art world's commodification of such images. In *White ppl think I'm radical*, the artists invert this, Farah rendering the gaze outwards, his paintings in the exhibition becoming portraits of white close friends and family as gestured to in their titles, taking on a personal focus.

In *George* (2017) Farah paints a puppy in the arms of a companion, a very lived in house fills the mise-en-scene, a blanket thrown over an arm chair with a soft toy stuffed down one side and the iconic children's red and yellow toy car, it's cartoonish eyes witnessing the scene. Hamishi's painterly style is comical and subversive, the puppy's lopsided face and odd paws make the work look like the winning entry of a community painting competition, somewhat poking fun at the bourgeois history attached to portraiture and painting. *Photographer* (2017), depicts a commonly seen image of Kanye West caught in the midst of the paparazzi. His body stumpy and out of proportion, one eye smaller than the other juxtapose Deans works and use of gallery space. Farah's work destabilises white western art history and figurative paintings' occupation of the art market, with his brisk, patchy brushstrokes and the abnormalities in his subjects features. Combined with the titled individual not present, Farah further skews the white gaze and the politics of portraiture.

Both of the artists' approaches remind me of Adrian Piper's investigations into the relationship between visual resemblance as a way of identifying with a community. By creating representational work, Dean and Farah disable the habitual notion that race and identity is visibly noted on skin, creating modes of representation without reproduction. In the March issue of *Art Review*, Jonathan Griffin's article *Power to the People* focuses on the politics of representation and race in contemporary portraiture. He asks "How can artists put black and brown bodies on display in their work without submitting them to the violent intrusions of the imperialist white gaze?" In *White ppl think I'm radical*, Dean and Farah explore ways of doing just this. The "non-record" of the artists' friendship and investigations into how to (not)represent what is (un)representable works by seeing the blind spots in the visible real. Through their varying practices, and modes of (non)portraiture Dean and Farah redirect the address, and reconfigure the power structures of portraiture and the representational real.

Time Out

White Ppl Think I'm Radical

Time Out says

Two black artists have been brought together for this exhibition. They share common interests in race and representation – and they also happen to be friends. There's the Somalia-born, Australia-based Hamishi Farah, whose lurid, dappled paintings might be described as van Gogh for the era of the selfie. His pictures of a puppy and toucan – named 'George' and 'Helen' respectively, after white friends – are cheeky and subversive. They're also frankly hideous, and the old caveat – yes, but they're *meant* to look hideous – will test your patience.

Los Angeles-based Aria Dean, meanwhile, takes a sidelong approach to portraiture. In a photographic diptych she blurs out her face along with that of collaborator Aallyah Wright, while her film of the Mississippi river acts as a kind of stand-in for her family history and, by extension, herself. Are these two pals a good pairing? Not really. Is it all so tidily theorised that you'll spend as much time looking at the gallery's literature as the art itself? Probably. But that's okay. Try to focus on the latter: some of it's very good.

Written by [Matt Breen](#) Thursday 23 February 2017

“The exhibition is the friendship”: On holding space + doing it for the squad with Aria Dean + Hamishi Farah

Audrey Phillips, 9 March 2017
Interview



Hamishi Farah + Aria Dean, *White ppl think I'm radical* (2017). Exhibition view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.

“...his brother was forced to leave as well, but he escaped by hiding in a coffin,” [Aria Dean](#) is talking about the circumstances under which her great uncle fled Yazoo City, Mississippi. Her grandfather was run out of town as well. The anecdote is prompted by a question about what motivated the Los Angeles-based artist and writer to make ‘Wata (Yazoo, MS),’ a video included in *White ppl think I'm radical*, a joint exhibition with Melbourne-based artist [Hamishi Farah](#) — whom we await on a Google Doc form.

The two recently met in London to put on the show, running at [Arcadia Missa](#) February 17 to April 29, with a press release that opens: “The exhibition is the friendship the friendship is the exhibition.” Named after a lyric by rapper Quavo in Kanye West’s ‘[Champions \(Round & Round\)](#),’ *White ppl think I'm radical* is an ode to community, support, and connectivity, with work that springs from months of online conversation between Farah and Dean. They have been internet friends for some time and are active members of an unofficial, small online community of black artists, the global african diaspora who’ve found a space to operate and connect on the internet.

“We don’t really have art niggas in Australia,” writes Farah, “I guess that makes me thirsty as fuck to connect and bounce positions and thoughts on art and the black diaspora.” The three of us live-rant on the Google Doc form. We differentiate our voices using different font and color choices. I opt for black bold arial font, Dean writes in the same, but bright red and not bold, Farah writes in an orangey-brown Cambria, highlighted in grey. We are each in different time zones: Pacific, Eastern, and Australian Eastern Daylight Time so chat on the form offers us more flexibility than Gchat or Skype. Conversations bounce around non-linearly, each of our cursors interjecting on any sentence being typed at any given time.

The energy is positive and fast. Communication is natural and the two seem to complement each other’s thoughtfulness well. Both articulate the complexities of blackness under white supremacy with a stress on community as a form of resistance and portraiture. Their highly attuned conceptual rigor not only yields exceptional work but also functions as a platform for survival, giving Dean and Farah the awareness needed to be four steps ahead of any potential backlash. Art becomes a very specific tool used to evince a shared experience, a network, a reclamation of image and trauma.

The work in *White ppl think I'm radical* is secondary to the the experience of Dean and Farah’s friendship. This isn’t to say it can’t stand on its own. It can and it does, proposing a whole new way of looking at black portayal. Dean worked with [Aallyah Wright](#) — whom she met on Facebook and lives in the same region from which her grandfather was expelled, and [credits](#) as her collaborator on both the video piece and the photographs included in the show. Dean says, “I used Aallyah as a proxy for myself, she is my age and is

also black. I tried to render us like equal partners in producing the work, or at least blur the distinction between our ‘selves’, referencing the problem of black ontology and subjectivity.”

Along with this, Dean and Farah’s attention to camaraderie is indicative of their atypical priorities when putting on a group or two-person show. They emphasize the importance of ‘holding space’ for one another, rather than taking it for themselves as individual artists. This gesture activates their conceptual framework as it becomes a lived experience that is then reflected by the work: the importance of community, Quavo, and the power of an inside joke.

** What was it like meeting and working together in person? What was your relationship like before you met?

AD: Yes, it was our first time meeting. Before meeting in London, Hamishi and I were friends on Facebook and such; like part of what some people (maybe Winslow Laroche coined the term?) called ‘black net fam’ or something, ha ha. So I think we were in this network and also had other mutual friends offline and stuff. But once Hamishi asked me to do the show with him, we started Facebook chatting a lot under the auspices, haha, of planning the show out but mostly just chatted and gossiped and sent links to new songs we were listening to.

I think at some point it took on this diaristic format because of the time difference. I found that really interesting. And we also talked about art! Ha ha, I think of ‘the exhibition is the friendship’ in the sense that we thought alongside each other for a few months, despite the distance. And, at least from my end, the stuff shown at Arcadia Missa was the result of everything that happened in that period — including but not limited to our correspondence.

HF: The internet is cool but there is a cap on how much you can do, I think a lot of the frustration, gaslighting, and difficulties around being a black artist has such physical repercussions. So it’s really nice and crucial to be in the same space as one another, being able to make sure you can take care of one another and talk shit in person with fewer distractions. I think the white peripheries online (while you’re in chat and your stream’s still going)

sometimes makes chatting a much less private space than a restaurant or something.



Hamishi Farah, *Photographer* (2017). Installation view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.



Hamishi Farah, *George* (2017). Detail view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.

I think regarding Winslow's 'nigga net fam,' the first thing is to use whatever resources we can get a hold of to link up, then stuff can come after that. You know like you don't want to project your idea of 'the answer' or 'the way forward' but just work on putting each other in the circumstance to come up with it together. I feel really lucky to be offered those resources and so lucky for Aria being down with it. I think hanging out with her in London and making the show together had such a huge impact on the outcomes and how easy it all was. I think in 'the exhibition is the friendship,' prioritising being together, made making work and showing it so simple and takes a lot of weight off. You know, like art is a tool to enable stuff like this, rather than us working our asses off anxiously to uphold the sanctity of some idea of art. Because of this I couldn't really imagine it being more successful.

** Was this your first time in London? Also what was your experience like in the city, together, and also navigating white spaces, such as the gallery for example?

AD: In terms of white spaces — it's unfortunately par for the course, I suppose. Like Hamishi is in Australia — *sooo* white, ha ha — and I'm in LA usually, but went to liberal arts school and I work in the art world. So, for me at least, I'd say it was no whiter a space than anything else. But I think the fact that we were there together was really great, in that maybe the space wasn't that white on this occasion?

I think, in planning the show, we were really interested in the possibilities of doing it in a gallery space, where we're really speaking to each other more than to the audience. I don't know if we stuck to those efforts, but I think thinking about each other — at least for me — was sort of freeing. Of course, the white art-world gaze still exists, but I like to think that it's getting the cold shoulder, at least a bit and not through any grand statement, just a sort of mundane lack of concern. This is my hope at least!

HF: I really consider my nigga net fam family. Maybe this is patriarchal but I felt so ready to run up on anybody who threatened that. I feel really grateful to be in the position to even have that feeling. In a very real way because it was in person. I mean, I consider [Aria] and [the others'] future, also my own future. I don't have much real family so this is something very tangible to protect and try to help flourish. Even if it is a patriarchal thing, it is nice to find something in masculinity that I can feel proud of. You know, like exactly what Aria was saying: these people's futures are one of the only reasons I put up with the bullshit and work to try to thrive. On top of the trauma I've experienced here, being in Australia is so difficult because I'm so far away from them.

In the same sense I have black family in Australia, whether they be from African diaspora or my Aboriginal family here. A big thing going to London and the UK for the first time was a feeling that I needed to convey my anger, disappointment, and frustrations with the colonial histories. I was going to say something at the opening, but I got the chance to make a longer and more eloquent statement during a lecture I gave at Goldsmiths (which is [viewable on my Facebook](#)). I feel like if I didn't say something, or at least burn a flag, I would be letting a lot of people and myself down.

AD: I wish the word 'squad' weren't so overused by annoying whites these days because I would be like 'DO IT FOR THE SQUAAAAAD.' Because that is how I feel. I agree about the future thing. It's the ontology of the squad, ha ha.

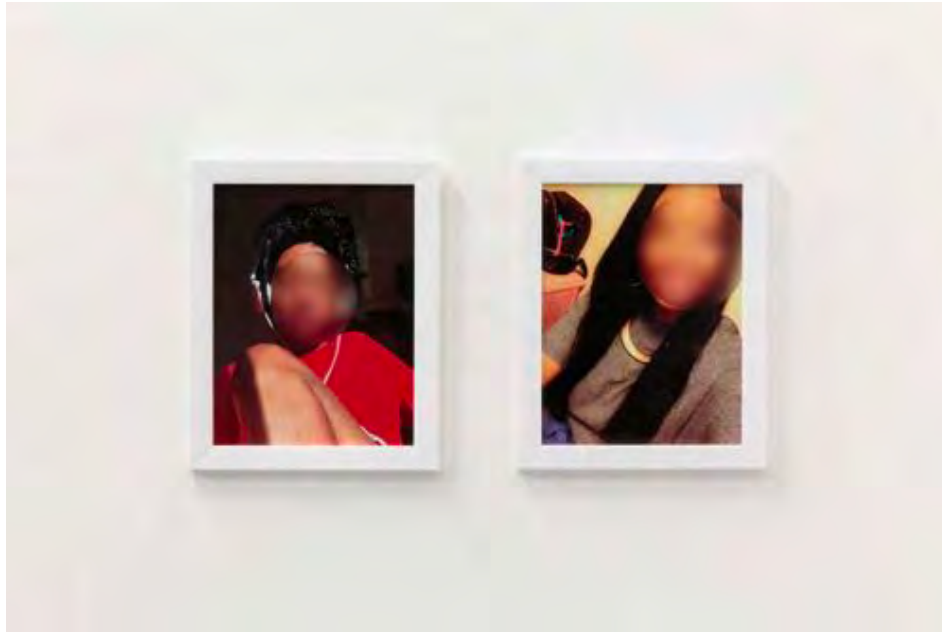
** Earlier you mentioned your correspondence leading up to the exhibition. Aria said you would exchange songs, what's the first song that pops into your head that was shared with you?

AD: Oh, that is so hard, ha ha. I have a terrible memory. There are songs, I don't know if they were in our chats or songs we were listening to in London.

I think of '[T-shirt](#)' by Migos when I think of Hamishi. Maybe just because one time he made a Facebook status that was like 'mama told me not to sell work' and I really don't know if that is the actual lyric of the song but it's how I sing it now?



Hamishi Farah + Aria Dean, *White ppl think I'm radical* (2017). Exhibition view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.



Aria Dean + Aallyah Wright, *Wata Proxy (Yazoo, MS)* (2017). Installation view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.

Also, maybe this is a good time to make sure everyone reading this interview knows that the exhibition title is a Quavo lyric. Everyone should also know the lines that succeed it:

*'They tried to turn me to an animal
But white people think I'm radical
Supermodels think I'm handsome
You might think I'm too aggressive
But really I think I'm too passive
'Til I pull out the chopper, start blastin'*

It's just a sort of inside joke about, like, the wide-eyed, drop jaw, white audience, ha ha. I love the complexity of the line though, ha ha, like the aggressive/passive thing. It's great. I could write a whole essay on that, ha ha.



Hamishi Farah, *Photographer* (2017). Installation view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.



Aria Dean + Aallyah Wright, *Wata Proxy (Yazoo, MS)* (2017). Installation view. Photo by Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.



Aria Dean + Aallyah Wright, *Wata Proxy (Yazoo, MS)* (2017). Video still. Courtesy the artists + Arcadia Missa, London.

*** I feel really excited about what will come. I love seeing these communities form and what results from the conversations and the intimacy offered online. I think the distance also adds ease to the communication.*

HF: Yes, I'm excited too. I think something worth mentioning is that there is a tragedy in the visibility of seeing these communities form. Like, I wish it were possible for you not to see it, of course the circumstances are what they are, but you know what I'm getting at, right? Maybe I'm commiserating the fact that there aren't resources for these communities to operate and form outside of the gaze, there is no closed loop. Maybe the goal is a type of secession, and these exhibitions, lectures, or essays operate in some way as a call-to-arms for that secession.

*** I don't see what happens within the community, I just see what results publicly. But I understand what you mean. In showing yourself you give yourself away to the oppressor. However, I think otherwise there will never be a chance. The transition is and will continue to be traumatic and people will continue to be exploited. I think it's important to mediate between the privacy within the community and what is shown publicly. I think I'm referring to the care and dexterity that is required of the black artist.*

AD: Regarding the community thing — yeah, I don't know, it's all confusing... like visibility is ultimately so tricky and I don't know how to feel about. I'm tempted to problematize even the visibility of us doing a show and talk about it 'blah, blah' but then it also feels good and important, so I really don't know where that leaves it. Meh, ha ha.

HF: It's really confusing and you can problematize us doing this, I just think it is a few steps ahead of ourselves or something. I think the goal for me is for black artists — or whatever they want to call themselves in the future — to be able to comfortably problematize everything we are doing, or are about to do. I think, in a way, proving our individual efforts as a failure would be the real success. The only posterity I'm interested in is this, of course there's ego and stuff but like whatever. We live in this moment and everyone plays their role. If we are seen as fucked up and problematic in the future, then it means a wider black consciousness is in a better position to thrive.

AD: I think that is a good goal — like having the space to work all of this out and not worry about the detriment.

** *Any shout outs?*

AD/HF: SHOUT OUT TO THE FAM ON AND OFFLINE THE INSPIRATION THE VERY HEART OF IT ALL

Winslow LaRoche, [Hannah Black](#), Brandon Drew Holmes, [Phoebe Collings-James](#), [Jasmine Nyende](#), Hanna Girma, Makayla Bailey, Ashley Lee, Christine Jackson, Emmanuel Olunkwa, Kyle Roach, Erin Christovale, [Martine Syms](#), Anwar Batte, [manuel arturo abreu](#), [Devin Kenny](#), [E. Jane](#), Chukwuuma, RaFia Santana, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Megan Cope, Cheyenne Julien, Ashley Doggett, [Zac Segbedzi](#), [Elizabeth Mputu](#), Brandon Simmons, [Brandon Covington](#), Divide & Dissolve, Dispossessed, [Juliana Huxtable](#), Kenya Johnson, Soraya [Lutangu](#), [Rin Johnson](#), Precious Okyomon, Still Nomads, Pastiche Lumumba, John Mutambu.

AD: Ugh, I'm already stalling out, ha ha, maybe this is bad, Hamishi. We are going to leave people out and then everyone will be sad.

HF: It's okay, we're not perfect we'll fix it next time.**

Arcadia Missa ï

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