

Hannah Black

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ARTFORUM



View of “Hannah Black,” 2015, Arcadia Missa, London. From left: Black Quadrilateral 4, 2015; Black Quadrilateral 2, 2015; Black Quadrilateral 1, 2015; Black Quadrilateral 3, 2015.

*Hannah Black’s writings and artwork address race, gender, class, pop culture, and geopolitics, among other things. Her first solo show at Arcadia Missa in London, which she discusses here, opened on October 2 and runs through October 31, 2015. Black is also currently participating in two group shows: “Workland: the fence is a narrow place” at Chateau Shatto in Los Angeles, on view through October 31, and “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter” at the Yarat Contemporary Art Center in Baku, Azerbaijan, which runs through January 7, 2016.*

THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENT types of objects in this exhibition—airline blankets, a video, and big paintings that operate as space dividers, like you might find in an office. But the show was conceived as a single installation about a dialectic between block and flow, which I think is fundamental to how capitalism works. Capitalism imposes extraordinarily stable racial and gender identities in a market-forged world that values transformational processes such as exchange, progress, and growth. Goods and money move more freely than people. But some people can also move very freely: rich people with certain passports, for instance.

I was interested in relating these ideas to a contemporary discourse around the relationship between blackness and abstract principles of capitalist accumulation and social control. What happens when these principles of accumulation are given flesh and walk around? The gallery space is related to the same entanglements all my work addresses: the white art world and contemporary art as a social form that pantomimes ideologies of global flow and global subjectivity. For a lot of leftists there’s this outraged cry: “What do you mean that there

are limits on my knowledge?” But maybe knowledge gets more interesting, not less, when we recognize its limits across subject positions, when we don’t make it subordinate to a blanketing, universal subjectivity.

The video, which shows images of trade, flight, and circulations of all kinds, addresses this most explicitly, and the airline blankets evoke individual discomfort, the care of people’s bodies, and mass circulation at the same time. I read that metabolism comes from the Greek *metabolē*, or “change,” but that the word could also mean exchange or trade. Between the body and the ordering of the world there are all these ideological confluences— if someone says “blood circulates” or “commodities circulate,” in a way the relation is totally metaphorical but it’s also made real through different forms of control: threats of violence or exclusion or poverty. In every case, living is at stake.

Frank B. Wilderson III’s ideas have been helpful to me in thinking about this show. He comes out of a Marxist tradition, but his political desire is bound up with black liberation. He talks about how blackness, understood as a kind of permanent negation of subjectivity, is the disavowed heart at the concept of “subject” or “citizen.” Since I first read Wilderson, I’ve also become interested in theorists like Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten, but I really value Wilderson’s punk negativity because it contrasts with the positivity of activism. It refuses to respond to the demand that we have to be able to describe alternative worlds before we have the right to desire them. Part of me is just in a long tantrum about having to live with all these crazy traps of race and gender, and Wilderson speaks to that. Also, in Jared Sexton’s 2008 book *Amalgamation Schemes*, he talks about race as a scratch, a line going astray, so in the show I scratched these crude smiley faces into brown paint on the dividers, because I wanted to ruin the surfaces and make the objects abject with these grotesque, ingratiating smiles.

I think this show is a little despairing, but despair about politics isn’t despair about the world. I’ve carried around race and gender like a stone in my throat for a long time and now I am giving more credence to this stuck stone—in fact it’s the only thing I’m giving credence to. I like Wilderson’s stance on art as a place where you’re allowed to want the world to end, and I want to distinguish it from a bratty insurrectionist stance. I think the desire for this end is about mourning, just as the 2011 London riots could be understood as mourning, and so could everything that happened in Ferguson and after. I’ve been thinking about how mixed up the desire to live and the willingness to die are, and how they don’t need to name themselves as political.

*- As told to Paige K. Bradley*