

New York

Aria Dean

AMERICAN MEDIUM

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There is a comedic straightforwardness to Aria Dean's work that betrays her ulterior motives. The artist deploys cliché, often and with pleasure, starting with the first eyeful of her exhibition, *Untitled (Obscenities)* (all works cited, 2017), a sculpture composed of a handmade red satin bow dangling from a steel chain and pipes. An overtly romantic gesture sullied by wax drips and telltale traces of manual facture, the droopy gift-wrapping sets the tone for Dean's pushback against objects' undue symbolic burden.

Dean is playful, not precious, with her materials. *Carry the Zero*, a plastic blowup doll with a spigot for a mouth, lies vulnerable on the floor. Its transparent body calls to mind a sex toy or the cartoonish chalk outline of a murder investigation. The artist layers reference upon reference until the object's meaning collapses into chaos. For example, the series "Untitled (Canvas 1-4#)," is made up of cotton batting stapled to sets of stretcher bars and burned in areas with a lighter—Dean's take on the blank canvas. Her fuzzy paintings, readymade jokes that tweak Minimalism's conceptual heft, also allude to American slavery, which provided the infrastructure for the industry to flourish today.

The artist draws parallels between the way objects are treated and the way blackness is unfairly loaded as a surface, identity, and idea. Sincerity and irony meet in her video *A River Called Death*. In the film, shots of a starry night and the Yazoo River in Mississippi are captioned with a narrative starring Death as a figure synonymous with the mysticism and everydayness of the Southern tributary. "She waded in, ducking under," reads the silent screen. "It's just a quick ride to the bottom where wood splinters and limbs appear one and the same."



Aria Dean, *Untitled (Obscenities)*, 2017, galvanized steel, silk, wax, 39 x 10 x 50".

— [Kat Herriman](#)