

# ARIA DEAN

# TEXT BY ATTILIA FATTORI FRANCHINI

“Somewhat paradoxically, the more that Africans and their descendants assimilated cultural materials from colonial society, the less human they became in the minds of the colonists.”  
Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 1983

Reading can be a freefall declares Anne Carson's *Float* (2016). The book is divided into chapters with unfixed order. Hito Steyerl investigates freefall as a condition of permanent precariousness (*In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, 2011): “As you are falling,” she writes, “your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries. Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft.”

The work of Aria Dean resembles that experience. Your sense of orientation becomes a daze, as the self is confused with objects, materials and cultural references powerfully chosen, each quoting and connecting disparate notions. Smartly dissecting everything we know about art, race, the art object, gender, ourselves and our perception of others, Dean's work exerts proxy images and inner jokes spanning across sculpture, video, sound, language and performance. Working as an artist whilst being an active writer and successful curator (Rhizome, *As It Stands*), each role impels a formally varied discursive position, playfully adopted to form an intertwined unique attitude. Offering a commentary on

the complex present condition, Dean enquires how black culture has been ontologically dispersed and appropriated by white forces. Across her work there is a transposition of societal concerns onto the body, a black liquid body, distributed through mass-produced objects.

Her first solo show *Baby is a Cool Machine* (2017), presented at American Medium last November, unfolds as a materially driven reflection on the situation of Blackness in the United States.

Dean sees the question of Blackness as unequivocally entangled with the art object, historically weighted as predominantly white and male. “How do you begin to unburden an object bound to nothing when you too are tethered to nothingness? No body. No history. No landscape. How do you release it from the clamor of its own form? Do you encode it, burn it, drown it in the yazoo?,” writes poignantly Hanna Girma in the exhibition's accompanying text. Central to the room, a plastic empty inflatable transparent body, *Carry the Zero* (2017), is laid lifeless. This body, a neutral body with no physical or racial definition, is a hint, a trace of cognitive reading. Is it you or the observed object that is laying lifeless? What if in the moment of viewership you become everything you are looking at? Dean raises questions of presence, absence and political invisibility. A series of cotton batting canvases, a material employed by Dean throughout her work, contour the space, *Untitled (Canvas #1, #2, #4)*. The canvases are burned and corroded, dark spots conflicting to the immaculate tension of the material. By employing such a charged material, Dean wants to unravel the art object, in this





case the monochrome canvas, questioning its status and the viewer's participation in various systems of oppression.

In her second solo presentation, titled *Gut Pinch* at The Sunroom in Richmond, Virginia, these themes are furtherly explored. Comprising only three works, the show is characterized by an electric tension and subtle sense of humor, calling for emancipated viewership. *A River Called Death* (2017), previously shown at American Medium, is a short silent film picturing long aerial views of the muddy brown Yazoo River—linguistically Yazoo translates as death. These images are interrupted by black frames, narrating a profound story about a ghost, Dean's grandfather, abandoning the part of Mississippi where the river runs. You are left alone with panoramic Southern views, the brown flow of the river waters, contemplating in silence ideas of erasure and disappearance. A red shiny ribbon tides a bale of cotton posed on the floor, *Untitled (Bale #1)* (2017), putting at stake ontology and perception whilst a mirror reflects Ad Reinhardt's quote "the bondage of appearance," printed in reverse on the wall. This simple gesture creates an awkward dialectical position. By seeing its image reflected, the viewers are suddenly aware of their presence in the room and the objects in it. The quote, purposely borrowed and only legible through a proxy, leaves the viewer excluded, lost in contemplation, far away from any possible ground.

Using repetition as a meaningful tool, materials and objects re-occur in Dean's practice as characters and props of a continuous enactment embodying different constructed spaces.

Dean speaks of the power of repetition in *Poor Meme, Rich Meme* (2016), addressing memes—originally black—as a strategy for cultural dispersion, a powerful vernacular appropriated by white capitalist forces.

By repetitively infiltrating a system can we subvert it?

In response to a recent invitation by the Swiss Institute in New York, Dean presented *Get-Together: A Tragedy of Language* (2018), a five-act play

portraying the increasing deterioration of the relationship between two couples at a dinner table. The performance, lasting for 45 minutes, is inspired by Eugène Ionesco's work and preoccupation with anti-meaning, but applies again a reverse strategy, employing failure and breakage to explore the western cyclical tendency to sabotage and constantly redefine reality.

Dean's important practice, clear and abstract as a language-game, seduces and contaminates at the same time, opening fundamental racial and conceptual questions about our accepted system of values and the oppression that lays behind it. As Hito Steyerl suggests, "falling does not only mean falling apart, it can also mean a new certainty falling into place."

*Untitled (Gear)*, 2016 Photo: Coley Brown  
Courtesy: AALA Gallery, Los Angeles (opposite page) *Two Cotton Bales Bound Together At 250lbs Each*, 2018 Photo: Brica Wilcox  
Courtesy: the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles (p. 193)