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Aria Dean  
Show Your Work Little Temple

Greene Naftali, NY  
07 May – 12 June, 2021

Review by Adriana Blidaru

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Installation view, 2021

Aria Dean's exhibition "Show Your Work Little Temple" at Greene Naftali in New York, is minimal, formally austere, if not a bit restrained. Everything is clean-cut and you can count the artworks in one glimpse: two black shiny sculptures on large circular plinths, seven wall pieces, and a pink wall that blocks off a part of the gallery. You wouldn't know it from the press release, but this formal minimalism is countered by a theoretical maximalism. The exhibition is scattered with a rich constellation of ideas from theory, art history, and philosophy, that seem to be conceptually choreographed in a "catch me if you can" game with the viewer. Dean's art practice goes hand in hand with her writing. The artist's most well known essay, "Rich Meme Poor Meme", contours an analogy between memes, black culture, and nonblack appropriation, in relation to digital circulation. Her most exciting work perhaps is the coining of the term blaccelerationism – a theoretical stance that addresses accelerationism, and proposes a third resolution, self-affiliated with Black nihilism, defined through the adoption of strategies aligned with the historical and social positioning of blackness in relation to capital. Some of these ideas reappear in the accompanying text that Dean wrote for her show at Greene Naftali as well, but, overall, don't expect this text to elucidate the exhibition. The one thing that becomes clear is that opacity is a strategy employed by the artist to facilitate critical thinking.

In the exhibition, Dean's interest in employing industrial production reinforces her commitment to minimalist tactics, such as rendering the "artist's hand" invisible and stripping away any autobiographical information. At the same time, her commitment to investigate the circulation, formation and erasure of cultural identities (especially that of black identity) in the online environment, brings a set of theoretical connotations with strong socio-political stakes to the use of new technologies. The two black sculptures, placed on white cylindrical plinths (a reference to a previous work: "Ironic Ionic Replica", from 2020), are 3D prints made of Polylactic Acid, a bioplastic derived from corn starch or sugar cane. They look like shape-shifting objects caught in motion, depicting amalgamations of animals, objects, and brands. Indivisibly draped in a smooth, reflective black-latex, these amalgamations are emerging from a black cube. In the press release, Robert Morris' "Box with the Sound of Its Own Making (1961)", is mentioned, alluding to Dean's interest in its self-referentiality, the materiality of sound, and – once again – minimalism. Her interest in virtuality and materialism is also most palpable here, as both sculptures are transposed as hyperobjects: "blackholes shedding bits of information", as the artist implies in her text.



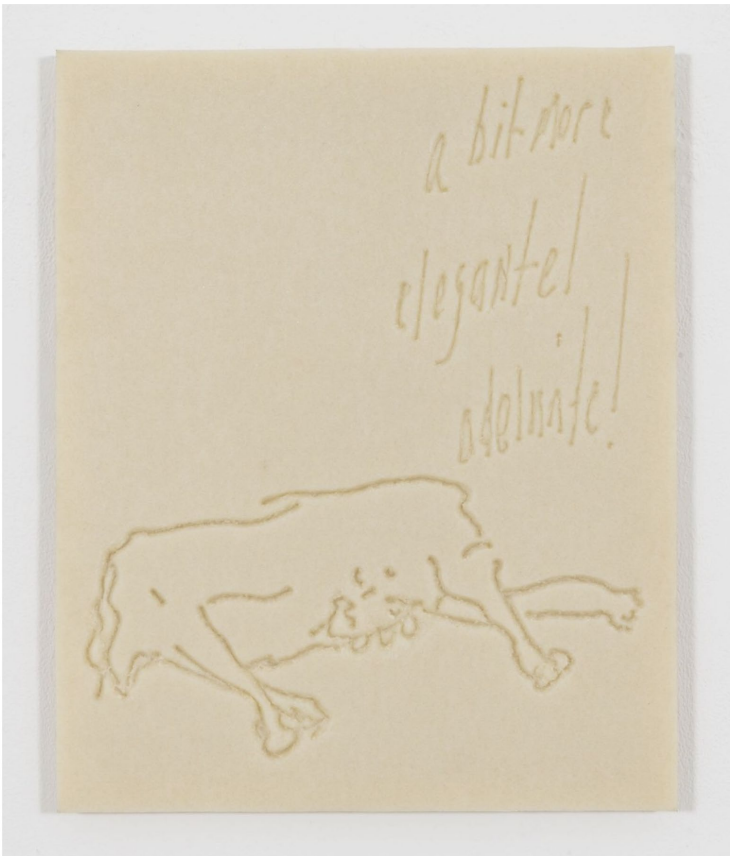
Work (new eye rag), 2021



Work (tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie), 2021

Wrapping around the room, on the gallery walls, there are seven panels made of soft beige rubber etched with the artist's own doodles and diagrams. Cryogenically engraved in fleshy rubber (often used for high-end erasers and sneakers soles), the line-drawings themselves appear somewhat guardedly unclear: the eye loses track of the continuity of the line, and often fails to recognize what the drawing represents. One of the works depicts a headless cow lying on one side, with an accompanying text in French, titled "Eraser (that's the abattoir!)", 2021. This is a reference to Bataille's concept of the abattoir – an establishment that is a direct descendant of the temple, since blood sacrifices have been made in both. In the accompanying exhibition text Dean writes how Bataille's concepts – including the famous term *l'informe* (and its rejection of humanism) – worked their way into her work through reading groups and conversations.

Dean's text adopts a first-person narrative that reads somewhat like a journal-entry; it includes poems, quotes, and tangential stories about discussions had with friends and family around some of her key-concepts. She writes: "(I'm) operating as the corrosive element even as I'm constructing something". Rather than clarifying the show, her writing seeks to complicate it, almost overwhelming it with references – a strategy used, it seems, to hijack an easy reading of the work.



*Eraser (that's the abattoir!), 2021*

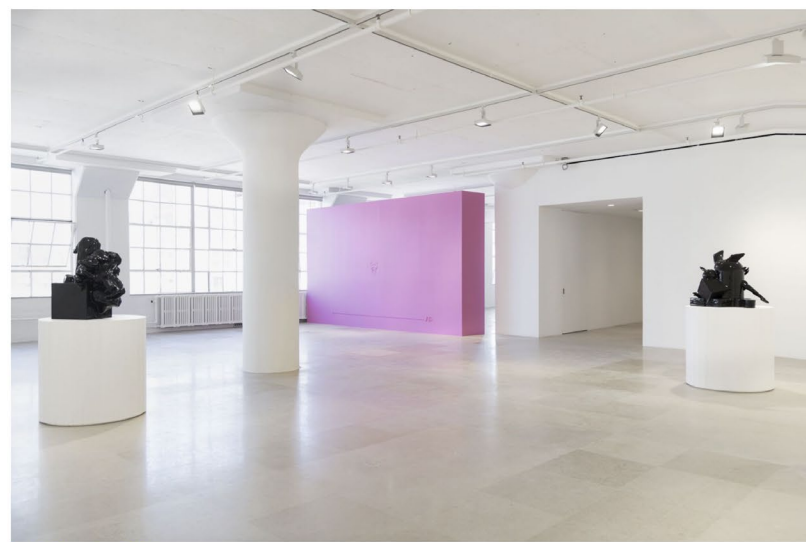


*Eraser (nonsense poems for the rationalist), 2021*

A perfect depiction of this strategy is the work "Figure Head", 2021: a pink wall that closes off part of the gallery, etched with an elongated gorgon face and with the initials "AD". Through the prism of psychoanalysis and socio-political theory, we get a dispersed reading of the myth of Medusa, as gorgon; specifically of her ability to be both a creative and a destructive force through her gaze, and further connecting this gaze with a black feminist reading. Here, we see the artist's train of thought and the myriad of associations that she pulls in for creating the work's symbolism. Altogether, Dean's text spreads a wide net through its citations: Hal Foster, Hélène Cixous, Mallarmé, Lacan, Deleuze, Robert Morris, Freud, Medusa, Bell Hooks, Bataille, O'Grady, Christoph Cox, to name a few. It is not unintentional that these connections co-exist side by side in a 20-page text; it's just like having 50 tabs open in one window. But this shifting sand that the exhibition operates on, is precisely the point and reveals itself as a form of resistance. The central concern of the show – and perhaps also its main paradox – is the artist's approach towards the concept of representation, and her challenge to a tokenized subjectivity.

"Anyway, this is all to say that sorry, no, I never wanted to be a subject. Ew." she writes. On one hand, Aria successfully disintegrates the easily readable subject position, through her direct employment of minimalist strategies, and through the construction of symbols like the gorgon (Medusa's objectifying gaze) and the hyperobject (those "things that you can study and think about and compute, but that are not so easy to see directly" to quote Morton). On the other hand, subjectivity ruptures back into the exhibition through the artist's own ideas and personal experiences channeled in the text. An interesting question worth posing here is: if minimalism has been perceived as a strategy of capital acceleration, and we have amassed and surpassed it (art historically speaking), then why return to the safety of past strategies? One also wonders if accelerationism's contemporary movement in the art world, post-internet art, is not more apt to take up the challenge of representation in relation to humanism.

With this in mind, it is exciting and rare in today's climate to see an artist actively working through these theoretical explorations, to find solutions and new tools to surpass the current establishment of representation and its persisting dualistic outlook.



Installation view, 2021



Figure Head, 2021

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CREDITS  
All images Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, NY

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