

Aria Dean Is Having Fun Just Being Herself



By M.H. Miller

Aug. 17, 2022 Updated 12:29 p.m. ET

There’s a game Aria Dean plays with one of her friends in which they try to group all artists, no matter what they make, into one of two categories: painters or sculptors. “Painters are interested in what something looks like and how it’s expressed,” says the 29-year-old polymath from her apartment in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. “Sculptors are interested in how something works, how it moves, how it enters the discourse.” As an example, she points to the work of two filmmakers: David Lynch, who once described a movie of his as “a dream of dark and troubling things,” and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, about whom the critic Roger Ebert wrote, “He had a certain contempt for the formulas of romance and heartbreak.” Lynch, then, is a painter; “Fassbinder’s probably more of a sculptor,” Dean says.

Although she has made videos, written a wide variety of critical essays and produced a play, Dean is definitely a sculptor. On the surface, her work has much in common with minimalist art of the 1960s. Both reflect an interest in austerity, materiality and what she describes as “objects that speak to the truth of the process of their coming into being.” But exploring such topics is different today than it was more than a half century ago. Take, for instance, “Little Island/Gut Punch” (2022), a newer work that is included in [this year’s Whitney Biennial](#). She describes the seven-foot-tall vertical rectangle, which appears to be buckling under its own weight, as “a big green monolith getting hit by an invisible force.” (It was designed on a computer and carved by an automated machine out of hard foam, but it looks like nothing other than itself.)



Dean's sculpture "Little Island/Gut Punch" (2022), which is included in this year's Whitney Biennial.

Photo: Zeshan Ahmed. Courtesy of the artist, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, and Greene Naftali, New York

For Dean, who was born in Los Angeles and studied art at Oberlin College, minimalism is a way of trying, she says, “to understand being a person.” The key to her practice is a 2017 piece called “[Dead Zone](#),” which she refers to as “my first proper work” — and a “totem” for everything she’s done since. She sketched it in a notebook “in the one Black art class that Oberlin had.” A single branch of cotton housed in a bell jar atop a plinth, it’s also high-level trolling at its finest.

“I don’t have a relationship to cotton other than my shirt,” Dean says, toying with cultural expectations that young Black artists must address trauma in their work. Within “Dead Zone”’s base is a signal jammer, which blocks reception between cell towers and mobile phones; in other words, it’s an object that bludgeons you with meaning ... while simultaneously preventing that meaning from being broadcast. “I know exactly what’s wanted of me,” Dean says. “It’s for me to say, ‘It’s so hard to be me.’ And that just isn’t true. Personally, it feels very easy to be me. I’m having a great time.”

Hair: Junya Nakashima using Oribe. Makeup: Olivia Barad at Streeters