

ART

Aria Dean Searches for an “Ontology of Blackness”

In Dean’s works, we shuttle between experiences as personally lived and the sweeping generalizations of the media and historical modernism.

Matt Stromberg October 24, 2018



Aria Dean: *lonesome crowded west*, installation view (all images courtesy the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Elon Schoenholz)

LOS ANGELES — The title of Aria Dean’s solo show at Château Shatto, *lonesome crowded west*, aptly captures the dichotomies inherent in the the exhibition. Taken from the title of indie band Modest Mouse’s second album, it alludes to a relationship between the individual and the group, between experiences as personally lived and the sweeping generalizations of the media or historical modernism. She explores this phenomenon in search of what she calls “an ontology of blackness.”



Aria Dean, “Forward Proxy 1.3” (2018), clay, resin, wood

On the gallery walls hang five round panels, deep red in color, their shiny surfaces gritty in texture. Titled “Forward Proxy 1.1-5” (all works 2018), these objects aesthetically hew to conventions of geometric minimalism, however they also encompass a personal narrative that complicates this formal reading. Composed of Mississippi clay mixed with resin, they recall Dean’s family history,

the clay being sourced from an area where her paternal grandfather was raised. It can also be seen as a more general reference to the Great Migration, the mid-20th century movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to urban centers in the North and Western US. It is not representational work that tells this story, but the physical material that connects the personal to the historical to the individual work of

art. Whereas minimalism often claimed to offer ahistorical universal forms, Dean begins with the specific and lets the material shape the work, bottom up, as opposed to top down.



Aria Dean, "But as One Doesn't Know Where My Centre Is, One Will With Difficulty Ascertain The Truth . . . Though This Task Has Made Me Ill, It Will Also Make Me Healthy Again (Crowd Index)" (2018)

Near the panels, two video monitors play a 10-minute edit of crowd scenes taken from hip-hop videos, a piece with the ungainly title "But as One Doesn't Know Where My Centre Is, One Will With Difficulty Ascertain The Truth . . . Though This Task Has Made Me Ill, It Will Also Make Me Healthy Again (Crowd Index)." The crowd scene is a ubiquitous trope in rap videos — especially from the early '90s through the aughts, the period these clips are taken from — much more so than in rock videos, which favor the angst-riddled loner or the glamorous rock star. In these clips, however, what is prominent is the community, the extended network of friends and family that celebrate and commiserate together, and

whose members empower each other. Similarly to how different groups perceive left-wing mobs and migrant caravans, this piece is like a rorschach test: How you view the black crowd says more about you than it. As Dean noted in a recent [Artforum interview](#), those with little experience or empathy for communities of color will perhaps see a threatening mob, a singular, faceless body, as opposed to a collection of unique individuals who band together for support, security, and camaraderie.



Aria Dean, "Summer Ghost" (2018), silk, galvanized steel, glass, 61 x 15 x 15 in.

The final piece, "Summer Ghost," is an ethereal work that acts as a punctuation of sorts to the whole show. A white sheet draped over a sphere mounted on a pole hangs limply, almost reaching the ground. The haunting form — the most basic expression of a ghost — references an absence, a loss that pervades the black American experience, from slavery, through segregation, geographic displacement, economic disenfranchisement, police brutality, and institutional racism. Bound up in this generic spectral image is the connotation of the white sheet with the hoods of the KKK, and the fact that "spook" was once a well-known derogatory term for an African American. The fact that these connections will strike some as more obvious or troubling than others only serves to deepen the tension between the one and the many, the specific and the collective that Dean thoughtfully teases out.

[Aria Dean: lonesome crowded west continues at Château Shatto \(1206 Maple Ave #1030, Los Angeles\) through October 27.](#)