

BOMB

Models/Mush: Aria Dean Interviewed by Blake Oetting

Investigating representational demands in sculpture, video, and writing.



Installation view of Aria Dean, *Little Island / Gut Punch*, 2022, hard foam coated and painted, 85 x 32 x 32 inches. *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2022. Photo by Zeshan Ahmed. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

In addition to her writing practice spanning criticism and dramaturgy, her various curatorial projects, and her more recent editorial role at *November*, Aria Dean has increasingly turned to sculpture to propose a set of meta-critical positions. This work schematically approaches the ways that biography, identity, authorial trace, and materiality cohere and fail to cohere in the art object. The analytical thrust of this work is supported by and supplements Dean's study of various art historical and philosophical traditions, including Minimalism, structuralist film, ontology, and Afropessimism. Her work is currently on display at the Whitney Biennial.

—Blake Oetting

Blake Oetting

People might reasonably assume that your visual production was originally conceived as a set of test cases for the ideas that you were working out in your writing. Is that true? I feel like it might happen for you in the opposite direction now.

Aria Dean

I think you're right that there's some inversion that might have happened recently. Initially, I'd have a question about something, and I would try to write myself toward an answer. Then I would make work when language began to feel like it wasn't solving it. The swirl of words and premises that was coming up in the writing would end up being the basis for some of the work. But when I wrote "Closing the Loop" (2016), I was working in the reverse. I was militantly against making performance or photographic work that included my own image, so I was wondering, "Why don't I want to do that?" Now I consider the writing like artworks unto themselves.

BO

Do you have any desire to edit those early essays, like "Closing the Loop"?

AD

The opening of "Closing the Loop" is "Maybe 2013 felt like..." I could change it to something more decisive; but then I think, no, because I was twenty-two when I wrote this, and the voice, and its lack of certainty, is fine. Each of these things really is like a time capsule, and I would never write them in the same way, if at all, now.

The privileging of process over a finished object is really important to me. Early on when I was still working at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, I remember Lauren Mackler was doing a project at the museum and framing it as "thinking in public." That's the framework that I hope to achieve as well. I need to maintain the looseness of the work so that no one ever expects that it's settled.



Aria Dean, *Work (tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie)*, 2021, 3-D print in polylactic acid, pigmented silicone, 66.25 × 35.75 × 35.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

BO

I was just reading your essay in the Ulysses Jenkins catalogue. For your writing and artwork in general, ontology or ontological lack is a question that comes up a lot. Not just that of the subject but that of the artwork and its degree of finishedness.

AD

I think now I do have something like a program in terms of an ontology of objects and subjects. I wrote a piece called "Black Bataille" for *November* this past year in which I figured out how to talk about it by thinking across Alain Badiou and Ronald Judy. Judy's book *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiesis in Black* (2020) is great because he shows that to call a thing Black is to say that it's doing this thinking in public, this disordered poetics. Fred Moten has his version of that with the juris-generative tendency of Blackness to make and remake itself. So, I think I've been like, Okay, that's it, that's the ontology, if there is one.

BO

One does kind of reach a conclusion. There's a "bad" way of looking at identity as essential and fixed and then there's this other way of looking at it as inchoate. But developing upon that idea is tricky.

AD

Right, you're like, "So, it's all just mush?" There is this scary stalemate. When I did that show at Chapter NY, which I really enjoyed, I made a video where there was this mirrored plinth and these guys are talking about how "it's nothing" and "it's reflecting nothing." After that show I thought that there was nowhere to go. I boiled it down to complete nothingness.

There's the subject/object question, and there's also the abstraction/representation thing where the question is, "How do you not fall into the ideological trap of representation as a paradigm?" But also, "How do you not end up having to make black monochromes for the rest of your life?"

BO

I think your work finds a nice way out of that divide between representation and abstraction. Clearly, you are not buying into an affirmative model of representation, but "opacity" isn't the right description of your work either. You aren't running away from representation but trying to figure out how it functions.

AD

Yeah, I think you're right that opacity and refusal are two words that everyone is still tossing around because very few people want to read the confusing mush of post-structuralist thought that might give you a few other words. For a while opacity felt like it was the best word I had, and then at a certain point, I was like, "This isn't enough." The more I got interested in film and moving images as a mode of working I realized you actually can't enact this opacity thing if you've got people standing in front of the camera. It can be obscure, but it can't be opaque.

BO

I suppose one word, which you've used, that gets around this problem is "modeling."

AD

Right.



Aria Dean, *Forward Proxy 1.1*, 2018, clay, resin, wood, 30 × 30 × 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist; Château Shatto, Los Angeles; and Greene Naftali, New York.

BO

For instance, the *Forward Proxy* series (2018–19) models certain representational demands.

AD

The *Forward Proxy* series took the material of red clay that was supposed to tether the work to an authentic history and landscape. I was thinking about the clay in regard to Mississippi where my grandfather is from and was imagining that I would get the clay from there and be interested in the distance between me and that place. Then I discovered that the part of Mississippi that my grandfather is from doesn't have red clay, which is interesting, because I was bringing this myth of Southern imaginary to this material, and it isn't even there. That self-indictment is more compelling because, yeah, I don't know anything about Mississippi. There's no real relationship other than lore.

My friends and I play this game where you look at an artwork and you say if it's primary, secondary, or tertiary in its signification as it relates to its sources. So, a David Hammons basketball net or Pope.L's *Black Factory* (2003–) is secondary—it takes stuff that we understand to be culturally relevant and plays with it. Certain artworks are primary, which for me isn't where you want to be. Then the tertiary might be something like *Seinfeld* where they are talking about talking about things. For me the tertiary is where poetics happens.

BO

Otherwise there is a fetish for index.

AD

Also, beyond that, a vilification of things that do not index. That's what's scary.

BO

In Harry G. Frankfurt's essay "On Bullshit" (1986), he argues that liars have as much relationship to the truth as truth-tellers because they merely work in opposition to it. The real threat to truth is the bullshitter. You could make a similar formulation around representation. Someone making abstract painting might not really be the threat. They are still working in relation to representation. It's the person that wants to short-circuit representation who is more dangerous.

AD

My friend Sam made this diagram that tried to place artists according to how they give themselves over to identity.

BO

Identity in the expanded field.

AD

Yeah. I got really obsessed with Klein four-groups for a while and making them with different terms. I tried to do one for Blackness. In the past few years “the trickster” is another buzzword that is kind of like the “bullshitter.” But the trickster is trying to provoke versus the bullshitter who doesn’t give a fuck about what you think. I really identify with that.

I’ve gotten obsessed with whether it’s okay for artists to lie. If the object doesn’t do what someone tells you it does, is that okay?



Aria Dean, *(meta)models: “I” is a crowd (demo)*, 2019, digital video, six minutes, four seconds. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

BO

This brings up the question about whether criticism makes for good art. In some way the critic’s job is to decide when the artist is lying. But now there’s so much emphasis placed on the artist’s words.

AD

And that at the same time everyone is sifting through the work trying to find out what’s real and what’s not. There’s this weird, distended empiricism in which the only thing that’s true is what people tell us is real for them. The postmodern fracturing of grand narratives has fractured into rubble where it’s like, “They said this, and they have less privilege than me, so I’m just going to go with it.” I feel like there was a moment when how I chose to engage my politics started to diverge from some of my peers in the art world.

BO

For your show last year at Greene Naftali you wrote, “I’m corrosive, as we know. Nothing I hold can remain constituted as simply itself for very long.”

relationship with images and representation. But, no, I'm actually interested in making something that is holistic and actually does operate, is functional and works as a system or as an object unto itself. I've said what I need to say about Blackness, and now this question of universalism is more important—how to extrapolate what I've discovered in relation to Blackness and move to the next tangle of stuff.

Aria Dean's work can be seen in Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept until September 5.

Blake Oetting is a PhD student at New York University where he studies modern and contemporary art. In addition to BOMB, his writing can be found in Artforum, Texte Zur Kunst, Flash Art, and The Brooklyn Rail.