

“At this stage”

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Where to begin? Where else but at this stage? A cotton boll embalmed in a bell jar like the Disney rose in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991): Aria Dean’s *Dead Zone (1)* (2017) gives the rose’s place to a white commodity once harvested by black people made commodities. The cotton stands there like a badly conserved museum piece that still reeks of shame. But there is a current charge, too: viewers can take their photos, but they’ll have to wait to post them. Under the bell jar’s oversized base, Dean has hidden a signal jammer modeled on the ones Beyoncé’s bodyguards use to scramble any cell phone in the star’s radius. We are at the stage where a celebrity needs military-grade technology to stage-manage their image—and meanwhile in the ongoing spree of police murdering black Americans, video evidence earns no justice, only spectacle.

Dean’s is the first piece inside gallery Chateau Shatto for this summer of 2017; this is a topical group show, and the topic is a gut check of American exceptionalism. At this stage! The phrase suggests a sequence, a disease—progression, if not progress—like the shot holding on a film of a skyscraper in *Sturtevant ‘Warhol Empire State’* (1972). In Sturtevant’s revision the Empire the building stands for is laminated to the Empire of Andy Warhol, an ambivalent, postmodern reverie whose scope ranges from race riots to mass goods, celebrity-and death-spectacle included. Jordan Wolfson’s 2009 video *Con Leche* plays on a monitor just behind the Sturtevant. Warholish ranks of animated glass Diet Coke bottles march on little pink feet through footage of a blighted city. Milk sloshes at their mouths—a white liquid where you’d expect a brown one. Control, modulation, and abuse are all of a piece: a female voice actor reads extracts from message boards while a male voice (Wolfson) gives her directions like, “Can you please normalize your speech.” At one point the work’s racial undertones spill over, and the voiceover describes—practically in a panic—that despite going to school with “black folks” she’s “never been part of what I’d consider a friend relationship with someone black.” “Can you pause? Thank you,” says Wolfson—“Can you please decrease your volume.” At this stage, time for an honest display of our grossest contradictions.

We are on the stage, too, cartoonishly re-performing cartoon violence. For *Western Exterminator / Kernel Kleenup / Little Man / Pesterminator* (2013–

15), by Parker Ito, a dozen statuettes clatter into the gallery's back corner. Each is a version of the registered trademark of Western Exterminator, an L.A.-based pest control company: a top-hatted capitalist, one hand admonishing a hungry mouse, the other gripping a mallet behind his back. The bronze statuettes are variegated with automotive finishes; some are dismembered, some Swiss-cheesed with holes. In *Café L.A.* (2015), by Body by Body, the storefront of something called "Café U.S.A." is depicted in a CNC-routed relief behind a set of powdercoated black bars. In the windows are the silhouettes of a cop with nightstick poised, two sets of hands raised in self-defense. Bunny Rogers's video, *Mandy Piano Solo in Columbine Cafeteria* (2016), sets a Mandy Moore-like CGI character behind a piano at the site of an infamous school shooting. (The Columbine cafeteria, of course, is also where security cameras captured chilling footage of the killers.) The girl plays three Elliott Smith tunes, sloshing red wine on the drifting snow, a composite of the late-90s' early-oughts' most cliché images of violence, suicide, and teen angst. The piece is a reminder that the United States has been in a saccharine self-immolation for some time.

The gallery's storefront window has been covered with a vinyl print by Martine Syms: a grainy halftone image of a parked white car, which asks, via a speech bubble, "WANT SOME?" Syms's title replies: *Some What?* (2016). "Some What?" feels naïve, or parrying—but if the car's solicitation has the tang of a threat, Syms's response turns it toward a conversation. Like kids who weren't yet born in 2001 making 9/11 memes, we haven't "processed" our trauma very well—or maybe we have processed that trauma exactly, and to render a traumatic image is our best shot at critique. In the middle of the gallery is *Flagwaste (Stars and Stripes)* (2016) by Gardar Eide Einarsson, a waist-deep pile of red, white, and blue flag scraps that it turns out aren't destroyed American flags but the trimmings from a flag factory. This, too—mass commodification and its LOLZ-ification—is that for which it stands. Meanwhile Dean's signal jammer throws a twenty-foot-wide break, and if to "depict" this present moment with a collapsing detachment is all art can manage, at least that might provide for some clarity in the United States's little nation-picture.

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