

Aria Dean with Travis Diehl Going Formal

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In eXhibitions, we bring the conversation to the artworks, discussing art from within the context of its display. Artist, writer, and curator Aria Dean met X-TRA Online Editor Travis Diehl at Château Shatto, Los Angeles, to discuss the granular tensions within her current solo show, Lonesome Crowded West, on view from September 8 – October 27, 2018. This is an edited transcript.



Installation view, *Lonesome Crowded West*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Aria Dean: The clay in the sculptures is from this part of Mississippi, two hours away from where my grandfather was born. It's clay and resin, around an inch, inch and a half thick, on a wooden support [*Forward Proxy 1.1 – 1.5* (2018)]. This series of works is about [my] proximity and distance in relation to

that place. These videos [*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)] are crowd shots from hip-hop videos. They index the sort of relationship that I was interested in, subsuming oneself into this particularly black crowd where individuals that already don't exist so distinctly as "proper" western individual subjects get subsumed into this other object. The show title is from a Modest Mouse album, *The Lonesome Crowded West* (1997), and I'm not a huge Modest Mouse fan, but I like the album. I latched onto that phrase. "The Lonesome Crowded West" is my situation in relationship to the objects. I am the lonesome crowd, in the west...

Travis Diehl: You being literally in the west, among the crowd...

AD: Yeah, and separated from this spectral crowd [the proxies] that create the objects. These [sculptures] are the beginning of trying to case the territory, because this clay is actually from two hours away from the location I initially wanted to get the dirt from. But the dirt that I wanted to use, because of the Department of Agriculture, they won't let you ship across state lines without certification.



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. Video still. Various formats, 10 min 47 sec. Courtesy the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

TD: I noticed how the crowd video plays on two monitors in the space, and they're both backed by these warehouse windows that look out on Los Angeles. What was your thinking behind that placement?

AD: They're exactly the same video, they're not synced up. I needed them to perform more sculpturally than a screen-based work might—to enter the space in this more embodied sense. It felt important to place them in relation to each other, but so they can't see each other. They're shadows of

one another, in a way. With LA behind them, it was more about wanting to bookend the show or keep the show between them. Most of the shots are outdoors, and—initially the work was sparked by this particular meme, the jukebox challenge, where black teenagers would take a stereo and run on the beach or through the streets, and blast this one particular song by T-Lo, called “All Day,” and do this dance. It looks kind of like the toyi-toyi, in South Africa, this dance they did during Apartheid [to protest the regime]. So this intense new rupture. And always outside. I got interested in what the black crowd is like in public space.



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. Detail of installation view, *Lonesome Crowded West*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

TD: The show feels very located. In LA, but also spatially, in the gallery. There's only one place in the gallery where you can see everything—at the angle of the 'L' shaped room. You can see both monitors. But once you're on either side, you have to remember that the other one is there. And the way the wall works are spaced, you can't see them all...

AD: Yeah, definitely. I've been calling them discs. I wouldn't call them paintings. I'm interested in what depth makes something a sculpture and not a painting, and objects that can sit on that line. I wanted them to bounce around the space. There's this idea that Fred Moten wrote briefly about—torqued seriality—things that are serial objects, but not a collection of objects, or an edition—just, you know, multiple instantiations of the same thing. I wanted to place them so that you aren't always able to see them all directly, you're forced to see some of them and keep track of the rest.



Lonesome Crowded West, installation view, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

TD: It's super formal.

AD: As the proxy aspect fell away from this version of things, the part about sculpture started to matter more. I've been revisiting minimalist writing, like Robert Morris, "Notes On Sculpture," the part where he says minimalist sculpture is about the conditions under which certain types of objects are seen. In the last year, I've been getting way more interested in how people interact relationally with the objects. The big cotton bale at Ghebaly Gallery [*Two Cotton Bales Bound Together at 250lbs Each* (2018)]—that was about density and mass and how people approach and come away from this thing, this basic, dense object... like that kind of inquiry but with the added element, the condition being blackness. I wanted to get more into that question; here's this material, from the South, how do I treat it in such a way that pays homage to or inquires into its history but isn't this narrative thing... So there's this whole process behind it, but then presenting it in a way that's purely material.

TD: It's interesting because initially you had this specific idea of what soil you wanted to use, then as that process became frustrated or complicated in some way, the work shifted into a more material, formal place.

AD: I spent a lot of summers in Atlanta and I thought all Southern soil is red clay, but upon actually investigating the soil profile it was totally different. When I started making work about this place, someone wrote to me on Facebook, "You should really be careful about making work about the South because you don't have any relationship with the South." And I was like, well that doesn't seem totally fair because I do have some relationship to this place. But I also can admit that I don't have an attachment in an emotional sense. So then the fact that I misunderstood what the soil was like there sort of pushed on that. What if I try to make a series of works that tracks with what I think this place is, but without presenting it in a way that's narrating my misunderstanding of it or asking, "What is the South, really?" But more about taking all that and turning into objects.



Aria Dean, *Forward Proxy 1.1*, 2018 (installation view, side view, and detail). Clay, resin, and wood, 30 x 30 x 3 inches. *Lonesome Crowded West*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photos: Elon Schoenholz.

TD: Right—your relationship [to the South] is a distant, “misunderstood” one.

AD: I guess it’s all part of trying to figure out just how much information objects are bringing. Formalism versus context. So much artwork right now feels like something inconsequential but that’s propped up by a personal narrative or narrative subjectivity. And I guess that seems inevitable to some degree: “Oh, she’s a black woman artist.” That kind of reasoning will always be invoked in relationship to objects or videos or whatever that I make. “It’s important because she has this relationship with these people,” or “it’s about her using the earth,” like it’s a weird primitivism sort of thing.

TD: When it’s actually sort of the opposite.

AD: It’s very much not that. So I guess I’m not trying to land on either side of the line in relationship to those things but really grappling with it and trying to use that as material.

TD: How do you—I mean I know the press release or the gallery text provides some of the specific context—do you have much input in that process, or?

AD: Yeah. We had a lot of conversations about how much to disclose, but then giving the context of the objects undercuts the objects, like they’re games or something. But we worked on how much it made sense to say. I think it was important to note [some of the context] just because people latch on, which isn’t some officially wrong way, and I would be interested in that misinterpretation and in my own misinterpretation, but there’s still this exhausting sort of anxiety of being misunderstood that never goes away. But I kind of try to linger in the space of being misunderstood.

TD: Right, like between theory and practice... So, but, why are the wall works circles?

AD: In my mind, they were always circles. I think partially because I didn’t want them to be to



Aria Dean, *Summer Ghost*, 2018. Silk, galvanized steel, and glass, 61 x 15 x 15 inches.
Installation view, *Lonesome Crowded West*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–
October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photos: Elon
Schoenholz.

painting-y, like a square or rectangular or anything. And I wanted them to be shown alongside video works and so to minimize to some degree the traditional picture plane. I think also because I was doing these cotton, canvas pieces and those were kind of my joke about painting. Also there are these Richard Serra forge drawing pieces that size and thickness-wise are not so dissimilar from these, and I kind of like the reference.

TD: And how do you get from the wall works to the—ghost? Sort of a ghost pop. It's almost in the place where you can see the whole show, but not quite, like it's almost a hinge or something.



Lonesome Crowded West, installation view, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, September 8–October 27, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

AD: *Summer Ghost?* The sculpture is watching the videos in this space. And it's watching itself. I think as I've moved towards things that are more process-oriented that seem a little slick, I also like having these more spontaneous moments. Like, in the American Medium show, I had this bow piece that was a last minute addition—it affectively annotated the whole show in some way. It was seemingly a very self-serious body of work, and here was this goofy object, this bow, to sort of break it up a bit. I think the ghost collects a lot of concerns, like the safety of the individual in the crowd, and the way the objects shadow each other. It's a haunted presence, or an absence and a presence at the same time. Initially I was going to use a regular sheet, then I found this silk, and then it has some weird bridal element to it, too. I was going to give it eyes or eye holes but then, without the eyes it could be looking anywhere.

Aria Dean is assistant curator of net art at Rhizome, New York. Her writing appears in X-TRA, e-flux journal, Real Life Magazine, and The New Inquiry, among others. She formerly directed the artist-run project space As It Stands LA.