



View of "Aria Dean,"
2021. Photo:
Brica Wilcox.



PRINT DECEMBER 2021

Inside velvety-black curtains shaping an oblong chamber between the concrete columns of the gallery, a checkered black-and-white carpet led to a curved film screen whose gravity appeared to warp the gridded pattern. Sit down for a while—the kudzu are dancing.

Immigrant vine, Southern cliché, official noxious weed: This widely reviled plant hungrily crawls with almost preternatural speed across landscapes to soak in sun, covering just about anything in its flurries of leaves. Once spilled, kudzu loves to spread, only ever given shape by the structures it covers which, in Aria Dean's video installation *Suite!*, 2021, are half-hidden tree trunks draped in leafy vines imbued by their creator with the power to dance.

I watched Dean's oddly compelling chorus line of greenery maybe three dozen times over a trio of visits as they sashayed and shimmied through digital space. In her sharp animation, the creaturely kudzu plants prance together and apart in often synchronized unity across the same checkered floor as that in the gallery, pirouetting through the Disney Concert Hall's parking garage, or mouthlessly smooching (I think) while coupled on some romantic stairwell. They huddle before green-room mirrored vanities and writhe over a Neoclassical column, eventually being immolated in a blaze of glory. Backed by the mournful meandering of synthy guitar and some digital ambient scrapery, Dean read, in a briskly breathless voice-over, through a hot scatter of excerpts. According to the wall text, some lines are pulled from the artist's journal, others from Renaissance natural philosopher Giordano Bruno, though many remain unattributed. These quotes lack annotations (none were needed, however—I tracked a few of them down). Without clear context or instruction, I gave up my pseudo-academic detective work and began to just dig their textures, anachronistic declarations, and contemporary critiques; poetic swords swiping through more mundane observations, such as the hard slap of an “arctic wind” and “the siege engines of perversity.” Despite my multiple viewings, my attempt at transcription came out horribly. Yet I kept returning because, despite enjoying the work, I couldn't quite figure it out. But eventually, as any good audience member should, I stopped trying to crack some mystical secret code and just eased into it, letting all these quotes kudzu over me. I grew to love the confidence of Dean's recitation and the way her research felt precise in its direction and reference, but beautifully way-faring in its ultimate destination. *Suite!* feels not like the declaration of a thesis, but like a record of the search itself.

There was some explanation available in the gallery regarding Bruno's theory about the universe containing numerous worlds, and referring to kudzu as a metaphor for Blackness. And both of these notions are surely true, but I don't really believe this is an artwork that wants to be neatly explicated or deciphered in any particular way. Rather, Dean's seven-minute movie is something discursive and artful and meandering, a kind of poem with a divergent array of possible meanings. The reviled vine becomes a stand-in for many things as well as itself, including perhaps the very nature of art: a weed that spreads over everything it touches, always needing other subjects to give it shape; a thing that is ceaselessly peripatetic, easily misunderstood, and perpetually hungry for a little light.

—Andrew Berardini