

(N e v e r) A s I Was

Widline Cadet

Texas Isaiah

Genesis Jerez

Jacolby Satterwhite

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On (Never) Being and a Dazzling Nothingness at the Edge of Nowhere

Our blackness now, a refracted consciousness, is so far beyond a Du Boisian¹ double. We are disintegrated and dissolved, spliced and transferred, duplicated and dispersed. Existing in a state of transition, we are hyphens first—if this Black sentence is a form of architecture, the hyphen is our outlook to discovery; we are here to rebuild and reimagine what’s been scattered and lost, memories never had. If this exhibition, *(Never) As I Was*, is a reimagination, we are tenderly housed by its title: the interiority of a parenthetical *never* a dark hiding place, the face(s) we keep from the world, the irreconcilable truth(s) we refuse as breathwork toward a future in an urgent act of survival. *As I Was* is a wobbly safe place, the presentation of a selfhood that rests with meek codependence on *I* as a fixed possibility, conceptually sound only in hindsight. *As I Was* is, then, an artificial gift: it gives us the false confidence that by looking in the rearview mirror we might still recognize the person we see shrinking into the distance; we might still be able to double back to save them.

The artists of this exhibition—Widline Cadet, Texas Isaiah, Genesis Jerez, Jacolby Satterwhite—self-determine the vantage point and outlook of the hyphen as a site of *in-betweenness*, an articulation of hyphenated selfhood, a strategic cypher that expands and holds the walls apart (—) within the hidden enclave of *(Never)*. Together, these works take us into those depths of radical negation as a disruptive or destabilizing vehicle that seeds distrust in what we assumed to be stable truths, organic economies, or necessary functions. *(Never)* is a window to, perhaps, what Professor Achille Mbembe observes as being the “best way to access ... different skeletons ... produc[ing] a form, not a spineless one but a tense and energy-charged one,” a lyric response to the “simple anxiety of annihilation”² that gives us our life back and lets us make it truly our own at last. With this beginning emergent from the end of *never*, we are left in drift and journey, (never) done, (never) whole, (never) finished, (never) fixed, (never) finite, (never) gone. The task now is not to *become whole* but perhaps to realize that a holy expectation of *wholeness* was, in some part, part of the problem in the first place, a supremacy of logic that sets us all up for an ecstatic failure. Thus, this space and the artists therein emerge from the framework of a posthumous becoming. The embracing and letting go of the dead parts, the things that bind our personhood, our memory, our movement, our bodies, the instinct to

¹ Reference to W.E.B. Du Bois framework of “double consciousness”, as found in his *The Souls of Black Folk*.

² Joseph-Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” in *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 1-2.

strangle the writhing, wriggling things we can no longer live with until they're still and deleted, a redaction as the empowered historical revision and reset we all need.

Widline Cadet brings together a presentation of pictures made via dynamic visual indices that blur the boundary between a family album and a series of varied self-portraits. Each photograph reckons with Cadet's vestiges of alternate, stolen, and concealed histories, a Haitian family's mythos cobbled together, in part, in an intimate collaboration with the artist's mother. Cadet's entanglement of new images that are glossy, staged, and highly stylized, and which live right alongside archival photos borrowed from the quilt of her kin, creates breaks in the sumptuous saturation of a diasporic life with pieces lost along the way, now re-dreamt and recreated. With these, Cadet guesses at missing pieces wayward from their sites of origin. The artist stitches together images that manifest impossible habitats, triggering tears in space and time by allowing figures from the past and present to occupy a mutual locality and psychic site. This process establishes an entirely new landscape of, and mapping between, the United States (now the artist's home) and of a Haiti that Cadet experiences through the life and language of her family stories, those that perhaps she will never know fully despite her reach toward them. Cadet grapples with the wilderness of a hyphenate and ever-parenthetical Black Arcadia, proposing new pathways in an ecocritical tradition that excludes Black selfhood and its presence in nature altogether. The Black pastoral is always out of sync with space and time, a fungible locality that grieves, moans, and decays as much as it generates and blooms. Cadet's figures navigate this tension actively: what is *contained* versus what is *contaminated*, what edges are toed at the precipice of a leap. As poet Joyelle McSweeney instructs us, "the anachronistic state of the pastoral is itself convulsive and self-contaminating ... a prehistory somehow concurrent with, even adjacent to, the present tense[.]" McSweeney proposes then that "the membrane separating ... the past from the future, the living from the dead, may and must [be] ... crossed."³ In Cadet's images, that membrane between past, present, and future is felt, and we push through it, at points getting lost in translation. The artist's titling of works pairing Creole with its English echo—situated in the (never) space of parentheses, wild vessels in and of themselves that bring in the artist's poetic voice as support to the images—shapes a conversation with its audience. In *Pou Lè Demen Kòmanse San Nou #1 (For When Tomorrow Starts Without Us #1)* (2021) a video is set into a larger framed photograph and we peer into it as if into a window. In the video, Cadet elects to have the story of her grandmother narrated by her mother and spoken

³ Joyelle McSweeney, "Part 1: The Necropastoral; On Being Posthumous; Bug Time," in *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015), pp. 21-22.

in Creole exclusively without subtitles. The artist's choice gently considers who should find their way home in this body of work and who might be set apart from it, triggering a sense of necessary alienation.

In his careful layering of hung photographs and what the artist dubs as “altars,” Texas Isaiah (who goes by both names together) extends care of worship, prayer, remembrance, celebration, and reflection. Deeply impacted by the lives and deaths of Black trans men Ki'tay Davidson, a disabled advocate for disability rights for people of color responsible for creating the hashtag #DisabilitySolidarity and the Twitter account @dissolidarity in response to the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, who then passed away in his sleep later that same year at the age of twenty-two; and Blake Brockington, an aspiring band director and composer who at the age of eighteen completed suicide after a struggle with depression in the midst of his transition, Texas Isaiah pays homage to “Black transmasculine, nonbinary, and gender-expansive folks” by creating a “dream state.” Instead of imagining this state as an impossible utopia, the artist embeds his work carefully, soulfully into the complexities of this world. The artist explains, “I extracted this work in silence. I didn't want to create a paradise so far away from where we find ourselves now.” Navigating the restrictive binaries of *masculine* and *feminine* and *manhood* and *womanhood*, the artist aims to, in his words, “insert Black transmasculine ideology as an essential chapter in Black feminism—by involving individuals who have experienced Black girlhood but blossomed otherwise.” Thus, this new body of work, collectively titled *Flowers at Your Feet* (2021), continues the discovery and exploration first begun by the artist in 2019, now spanning the locations of Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, New York (where the artist was born and raised), to the Exposition Rose Garden in Los Angeles (where the artist now lives and works), and Minneapolis, Minnesota (where the artist spent part of the summer of 2021). In the titling of his work, Texas Isaiah brings his idols—Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, and Essex Hemphill, to name a few—into the images as fierce spirits and ancestral stewards who guide Texas Isaiah in the language and blessing of the work. We meet protagonists Dash (he/him), BearBoi (Bear) (they/them), and Lex (he/him), who delight in a somber ceremony and convene with the artist. This intimate collaboration takes place in front of and behind the “eye” of the camera, troubling the role of the camera as a tool Black and queer people again and again have seen used for capture at the cost of their liberation. Texas Isaiah's making of images establishes a new Black gaze, pushing us up against and through the opacity of another membrane.⁴ Professor of Black feminist thought Tina M. Campt argues: “It is to the moving

⁴ Reference: McSweeney, Footnote 3

image, rather than still photography, that our communities now turn to capture the increasing precarity of Black life—that is, the precarious circumstances of Black people and the increasing prevalence of premature Black death.”⁵ Conversely, these images, built in unity between Texas Isaiah, Dash, BearBoi, and Lex, use the specific stillness of photography as a strategy for seeing how we are changed and held by the work. Texas Isaiah and his collaborators refute “premature Black death” as a natural state of being with a celebration of Black queer life that allows the present to be a place of collective joy, care, softness, and imagination. Through the slow quietude brought forth by Texas Isaiah’s still images, one confronts the relations of power enacted by social, cultural, and historical structures as haunted systems that can in their application both determine and disavow agency altogether. Insisting on bearing witness to those living and those lost in a (never) space of invocation, poet Sonia Sanchez speaks through her poem “Morning Haiku” (2010) in Texas Isaiah’s naming of the image *A RETURN TO EARTH IN PRAYER* (2021): “1. / Nothing ends / every blade of grass / remembering your sound / 2. / your sounds exploding / in the universe return / to earth in prayer.”

Genesis Jerez presents seven paintings that tuck and tangle the artist’s lived experience into the recesses of a fantasy domestic space. Teetering at the precarious brink of birth and decay, the works atemporally spool from Jerez’s (never) imagination. The artist’s work considers first the value and voice of a life—more specifically an artist’s life—and the ways artists are tasked with constantly wrestling with representations of the lives they live, and, conversely, the lives they are written into (with or, most painfully, without their consent). Through works that combine a rich collision of collage and painting practices, Jerez filters through cuts and threads of a spliced fictional family narrative wherein Jerez, as the maker of the work, in full control and with ultimate dominion over the family structure found across these canvases, chooses to kill off the family unit and its members therein completely. Thus, the artist positions the viewer in the eerily ordinary wake of this cataclysmic ending and, true to the artist’s name, at a newfound genesis, a (never) space of regeneration from whence new growth is at last possible. By destroying the proverbial “house” of the nuclear family itself, Jerez becomes the ultimate omniscient and omnipotent judge, master, and maker of how the story of this fictive family will be destroyed or resurrected. In conversation, the artist makes it clear: “These works are not about [my] memory.” Suspending us in between a fake-state of living and a dead-state as the chosen reality, Jerez gives us ghostly windows, an undead family album driven by a syncopated doubling. As French sociologist Jean Baudrillard notes, “when the double materializes, when it

⁵ Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021), p 4.

becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.”⁶ As part of the artist’s process of auguring the inevitable end and the cycle it begins, Jerez repurposes and remakes figures, settings, and material in duplicate patterns that become sonic registers, beats, tropes, notes, and foils, copies of copies that exist as mirror images and replicas across her broader body of work. We see this in the ways space exists in reverberation: the checkered walls that shut in around the contours of the central figure in *Dead on the Phone* (2021), ebbing back into view within the still life of *Four Pitcher Plants* (2021), and later, the languorous, florid, and fluorine stretch of *Blue Dream* (2021). Jerez calls on the biblical Psalm 59:1–2 as a compass: “Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me; deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men.”

In Jacolby Satterwhite’s presentation, the artist situates his new media work *Shrines* (2020) alongside twelve paintings, a return to a part of his practice that has remained central across the artist’s career, albeit one less viewed. Both facets are exhibited for the first time together here in direct conversation. Satterwhite, trained in his early years as a painter and influenced by the history of painting as a media and technology in and of itself, returns to painting as a way to expand and explode an understanding of all that has come into his practice before this point. The artist cites screen stills from previous moving image works, alongside photos from his personal archive of manual and iPhone images and pictures culled from social media and tabloid news. Invested in the ways fantasy can be used as a tool to engage, articulate, and process the lived experience of trauma, Satterwhite employs the framework of proxy or avatar as a means of creating placeholders both for himself and for those within his life, imagined selves, icons, and idols who extend the artist’s being in a myriad of cosmic directions. Steeped in religious symbolism and iconography, both in titling and composition, these works bring the holy and the secular into contact. Satterwhite plucks at the tensions between mania and spiritual transcendence, the taboos surrounding mental health and a New Age fetishization of wellness and self-care, and the complex value sets designated across these taxonomies. In this presentation, Satterwhite includes a portrait of the late Whitney Houston, as seen in *Holy Ghost (Whitney)* (2021), an image that departs from her typified glamorizing and instead shows her in the throes of addiction, surveilled and exploited in her vulnerability and pain. In another painting, *Boys Don’t Cry* (2021), Satterwhite is imaged via iPhone with friend and roommate Anthony, both swathed in colors that call to mind a Hopper or Vermeer. *Ice in My Belly* (2021), a tondo

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “Clone Story,” in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 95.

painting that features friend and musician Dev Hynes, in its roundness places the scene directly through the “lens” of the viewer’s eye and activates in all its drama and energy the spirit of a Caravaggio. *The Father* (2021), introduces us to a lesser-known figure in the artist’s work, as the artist’s late mother Patricia to date has taken a lead role across Satterwhite’s practice. Satterwhite also cracks open the innovations of what critic and performance art scholar Tavia Nyong’o calls forth as “non-binary blackness”⁷ and what here performs as an Afro-Fabulist⁸ relationship to natural space and landscape as seen in the artist’s *Fire in My Belly* (2021), a painterly pastoral scene drawn from the imagination of Satterwhite’s 2019 video work *We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other*. *Fire in My Belly* depicts Hynes dancing in a woodland Arcadia, a divine light emanating from his chest. By placing divergent imagery into a convergent site, the artist unveils split selves within split environs, illustrating what Satterwhite calls “angels with dirty faces,” an exploration of the ways Black and queer selfhood can and should claim a right to dynamism and range. Thus, the artist rejects the imposed lens and politics of respectability, exalting faultiness and failure as part of the nature of being human, a praising of the whole self in all its profound fracture.

(Never) As I Was initiates, reformats, and centers traditions of Black worship as a critical act of care, assembly, and reminiscence. Professor Ashon Crawley writes, “This is a love letter of those who have been called, those who are still called, nothing. This is a love letter to those whom are thought to have nothing, and in such not having, have nothing to give.”⁹ As we were in these speculative fictions, we keep remembering our preparedness now comes from having always existed at the end of the world. To call on and keep honoring Blake Brockington and the so many others we hold this (—) space for: “I am so exhausted.”¹⁰ Now (never), we begin again, here to keep remaking ourselves and loving one another.

⁷ Tavia Nyong’o, “Non-Binary Blackness: After the End of the World with Samuel R. Delany,” *Art Practical*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.artpractical.com/feature/non-binary-blackness-after-the-end-of-the-world-with-samuel-r.-delany/>

⁸ Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019).

⁹ Ashon Crawley, “That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 16, no. 2 (2016): p. 126, <https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.16.2.0123>.

¹⁰ “Blake Brockington,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, October 29, 2021), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blake_Brockington.