

carla

Issue 11



Dulce Dientes at Rainbow in Spanish

December 17, 2017–
February 17, 2018

Yelena Zhelezov's pieces in *Dulce Dientes* at Rainbow in Spanish bring together a host of repeating elements on gossamer-thin fabric: YouTube screen grabs, Google search lists, embroidery, decorative fringe, and visual riddles hidden in the undersides of bottle caps. Her work's materiality recalls the layering of technology's screens, behind which its mechanics, its back ends, its potential surveilling, lurk.

The bottle caps recur within each piece, each riddle spelling out the work's title, and acting as an anchor amidst digital and analogue debris. Zhelezov's YouTube frames source from "poorly made biopics" according to the press release, adding to the sense of a casual snapshot of one's mind by way of one's computer: the flotsam of phrases and traces of curiosity left in our browser histories. Zhelezov here overtly, perhaps politically, points to the ways in which we construct our own sense of history, based nowadays on a personal, free-floating, randomized level of interest correlating with the easy access of information and technology and the assumption of freedom that technology performs—for who among us would notice what links are omitted

from our Google search lists while searching for that which we don't already know. Zhelezov's personal is a deft kind of political.

The works in *Dulce Dientes* seem at first glance, as Zhelezov's do as well, adrift, if not iron deficient—save Rachel Lord's raging, anti-fluoride *Baby Teeth* (2017). Mads Lindberg's works seem particularly afflicted with paralysis. One of Lindberg's three *Untitled* pieces consists of a lightly painted bodyboard leaning against the wall and a small, nearly-blank painting above; the beige-ish, pinkish, whitish painted canvas gives way at one point to a rounded snippet of what looks like floor tile—the smallest indication of another world beyond the opaque.

But there's an agility to the linkages between much of *Dulce Dientes'* works, which thread the personal through the contemporary, digitized sphere and its predominance as an instantaneous source of visual and textual information. Two of Jason Burgess' paintings, *eliminationof-whiteworkingclass* (2017) and *allthewillintheworld* (2016), both employ glossily-sheened rock or faux-jewel shapes in a manner reminiscent of Ashley Bickerton. A literal interpretation linking the forms and titles seems possible, if a stretch, in the former—rocks, the sort (as in coal mining) which index altogether a working-class wage, the likelihood of ill health, and the certainty of environmental damage. Jake Kean Mayman's painting *Phantom Patriot* (Richard

McCaslin) (2017) takes a similarly oblique route to class concerns: a backwards Sears logo at the bottom is half crossed out by a thick, color-shifting ribbon—a pointed, if ambiguous, reference to the nearby historic Sears manufacturing center that has become a lightning rod in the gentrification fight roaring in Boyle Heights.

Where Mayman's lone work is roughly equidistant, formally, from Zhelezov's and Burgess', Lord's *Baby Teeth* is another monster entirely—a manifesto-like banner decrying the addition of fluoride to municipal water supplies, and overwhelming the remaining works' comparative subtlety. Lord's piece is goofy and frenzied—cartoon teeth drown in a deluge of thick, black liquid emitted from industrial vats in the lower section of the banner. A triumphant hand grasping a toothpaste-smearred toothbrush shoots out at the top between two belching smokestacks. Lord's work is stridently political in its depiction of the arguable usurpation of individual rights represented by fluoride; it is pointedly counter-balanced and underscored by the exhibition title, which translates as "sweet tooth."

The power of "the personal is political" has, as all power, a dark underside—namely, the erasure of a substantive difference between private life and public policy. Those at the short end of power have always known this. Contemporary media, marked by digitalization and the



Rachel Lord, *Baby Teeth* (2017).
Acrylic, graphite and pigment on canvas,
171 x 45.5 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist and Rainbow in Spanish.

easy, immediate access of information is a perhaps inevitable consequence of the purposeful erasure of the boundary between the personal and the political; whether such a boundary ever really existed, one presumably could once imagine that it did. It is this that accounts equally for the sense of loss and the sense of inertia so prominent in *Dulce Dientes*, and its predominant stance that our attempts to interpret and make sense of an ever-complex world can never escape the affects of our own subjectivity.

Adrián Villar Rojas at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA

October 22, 2017–
May 13, 2018

I accidentally entered Adrián Villar Rojas' exhibition through the back door. Rather than passing through tall custom-printed curtains and ascending cinematically up a flight of midnight-blue painted stairs at the museum's front entrance, I ambled through a backroom dotted with scaffolds, stacks of folding chairs, and tools—the mechanisms of a yet unbuilt exhibition. Later I would be berated by a proactive art handler, but this bumbling back entrance allowed a profound rupture between the finished space of installation—meant to transport and awe—and the actual labor, man-power, and material relied upon to create it.

Lindsay Preston Zappas

For his exhibition, *The Theatre of Disappearance*, Villar Rojas—undoubtedly with the help of dozens if not hundreds of others—has dismantled the preexisting architecture of The Geffen (not even the bookstore was safe from being deconstructed and rebuilt elsewhere). Perpendicular blue walls now loom over a raised platform of packed earth (16 tons of it) which displays 65 large rocks, 23 towering tectonic columns made of compressed earthen materials, and a dozen or more industrial refrigerators and freezers. The freezers, brightly lit from the inside with fluorescents, provide the only lighting in the dim exhibition, while also housing assemblages of various materials: animal bones, rotting carcasses, vegetables and fruit, floral arrangements, octopi, lobster and various crustaceans, human bone replicas, wires and vague machine parts, and the occasional neon-colored Nike trainer. One freezer houses an ode to Duchamp—an upturned bicycle wheel attached to a wooden stool. Yet, in Villar Rojas' homage, a large fish—gills splayed—is tossed into the mix, and a cracked egg is at the stool's base. Homage turned juvenile eggging.

Another particularly-composed freezer houses a beautiful floral arrangement dappled with pumpkin husks, crab carcasses, and fur pelts, all lampooned from the side by a large and imposing swordfish. The weight of the fish forces the careful arrangement into the lower left corner of the fridge and turns its slowly rotting

tail and dorsal into the stars of the show. Elsewhere, in other freezers, old-timey prosthetic limbs meld with driftwood, robotics, and assorted animal parts to suggest both our ultimate demise, and the promise of futuristic technological advances.

As an installation meant to be both a mirror and a portal—showing us our current selves along with our decayed, post-anthropocene, post-apocalyptic future selves—the exhibition might be successful. Yet, an awareness of the labor taken to elicit this well-trodden narrative of our ultimate demise is inescapable, inhibiting the potential for any revelatory experience.

Other recent blockbuster exhibitions at The Geffen—Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* and Doug Aitken's *Electric Earth*—have similarly relied on an extensive outside work force. Where the former two exhibitions (both by “rock-star” white male artists) were on view for the typical four months each, *The Theatre of Disappearance* has been extended to a lengthy seven-month run—perhaps indicative of the strain this exhibition placed on the museum budget.

“When an institution invites Adrián Villar Rojas to create an installation there are a fixed set of obligatory ingredients,” writes Bryan Barcena—MOCA's research assistant for Latin American Art—in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. Barcena supports this with a list of Villar Rojas' requirements: “a crew of Argentines living on site in a house,

1. *Adrián Villar Rojas: The Theatre of Disappearance*, ed. by Bryan Barcena (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017), 10.

2. *Ibid.*, P. 101.

3. *Ibid.*, P. 102.

4. *Ibid.*, P. 101-102.

5. *Ibid.*, P. 102

Nevine Mahmoud at M+B

November 11, 2017–
January 6, 2018

hundreds of Skype calls, thousands of emails and WhatsApp messages, innumerable CAD renderings, inventories of exotic objects and materials, and the booking of many flights to far-flung locations.”¹ Countless narratives from museum staff across the catalogue recount Adrián’s offbeat antics leading up to the exhibition—field trips to seafood shops, cake makers, and Hollywood prop houses. Later Barcena describes Villar Rojas’ relationship with institutions he works with as “parasitic in nature and function.” Indeed, in a lengthy interview with Villar Rojas, Helen Molesworth admits that when she first saw his proposed exhibition budget, she proclaimed, “Fuck, you can’t rethink your relationship to spectacle! Not on my dime. You can do that on your next project!”²

Though hyperbolic, Molesworth’s response emphasizes the absurdly expensive lengths Villar Rojas proposed to go to, leaving MOCA the bill. Referring to the planning process for the exhibition, the artist later tells Molesworth: “art, this art world, is very much a political battlefield, and somehow, this is what we ‘staged’ during our two years of dialogue and negotiations.”³ Yet two years of negotiations on this particular battlefield played out only for the select few *behind* the scenes. A further distinction amidst this behind-the-scenes battle is inevitable between the people *performing* the labor, and the people intellectualizing said labor (i.e., artist and curator).

Villar Rojas describes the tasks needed to create

a spectacle—and the resultant physical labor—as “limited resources to fulfill infinite desires.”⁴ He wonders, “Is all this invisible process more relevant to me than the visible side of my work?”⁵ Here the labor not only becomes pedagogy but also disregarded as invisible. The fact remains that this labor is not nothing: people are needed to *do* the labor. Stuff needs to be produced, materials cajoled. The labor is visible to somebody; the pertinent question is to whom.

Semantics aside, there is a conceptual rift between Villar Rojas’ experience of the making of the work and the average museum visitor’s experience of viewing it. While MOCA is often referred to as “The Artist’s Museum,” institutions also have a responsibility to be public-facing rather than navel-gazing. For *Theatre of Disappearance*, were the extreme amounts of physical, material, and financial demands worth the ultimate public-facing end product? A moody and ephemeral spectacle? It seems that the viewer is left to experience only a fraction of the work, and potentially only the less interesting remnants, while inside the inner sanctum of the museum, checks are written, flights are booked, and an intellectual battlefield spins onward.

The Greek sculpture, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, is believed to have been carved from marble by Praxiteles in the fourth century. The sculpture takes the goddess Aphrodite as its subject, fresh from a bath with towel in hand, looking up to the door as if someone is coming. She has yet to cover herself; why should she? Naked and unbothered, Aphrodite’s stance is casual, with her head cocked to the side, indifferent to the sound of an approaching viewer. As Anne Carson writes in *The Glass Essay*, “Nudes have a difficult sexual destiny,”¹ but Aphrodite can’t seem to care—while her gaze remains insouciant, her posture is locked in a perpetual state of come-hither.

Compulsive sexualization is a timeworn method of the male gaze, through which women are reduced to fragments of their bodies, visually spliced into tantalizing bits and shown only as a breast, a pair of legs, or a bare face made pretty and transformed by the removal of her glasses.

Nevine Mahmoud’s debut solo exhibition at M+B, kept a tight control on its objectification with precise arrangement and charged proximity. Its title, *foreplay*, alluded to an initiation. Mahmoud’s play with suggestion and expectation



Nevine Mahmoud, *Blue donut* (2017).
Image courtesy of M+B Los Angeles
and Marten Elder.



Adrián Villar Rojas, *The Theater of Disappearance*,
 October 22, 2017–May 13, 2018 at The Geffen
 Contemporary at MOCA (installation view). Image
 courtesy of the artist, kuri manzutto, Mexico City
 and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris /
 London. Photo: Studio Michel Zabé.



Josely Carvalho, *Waiting* (1982).
Silk screen and crayon on paper (diptych),
30 1/8 x 22 1/4 inches each.
Image courtesy of the artist and
collection of Josely Carvalho.
Photo: Ed Mumford.

*Radical Women: Latin American Art,
1960-1985*, November 11, 2017–January 6
2018 at the Hammer Museum
(installation view). Image courtesy
of the Hammer Museum.

gave an ambiguous effect: carved marble, steel, and delicate glass objects were provocative and presented alone, like prizes. Placement of work was precise as though marking invisible points on the floor like a sigil, charging the room with tension.

Mahmoud pushed at the edges of her visual vocabulary and her sexual references landed squarely: an unfurled tongue in *Lick (all works 2017)*, for example, and a dangling bell-like nipple in *Breast Shade*. Innuendo abounded; language was at play as much as materiality. *Mother Milk* featured an alabaster blob fit with a pinkish nipple, teasing at the possibility of its function. Similarly, across the room *Blue donut*, a puckered donut-shape carved from blue marble, was propped up like a tire or a beckoning orifice, contrasted with the complementary transparent yellow of its acrylic supporting column.

Fruit and skin share a similar texture of flesh. Mahmoud's stones looked touchable, smooth, maybe cool under the palm. A bite was taken from a wedge of orange calcite in *Slick slice* and, in *Peach ball*, a drip of glass glided along the split crevice of a pale, glossy pink globe of Persian onyx. The globular stone looked heavy and ripe, bursting but inedible. Mahmoud's objects read like luxury items, not unlike Venetian glass fruit clustered in bowls in ritzy mid-century homes. Hunger was aroused but refused; this teasing back and forth was volumetric. In *Abacus arm 1*, for example, a pipe wraps itself into a circle on the wall, threading

itself through giant beads of stone, like the toys found in pediatric waiting rooms made elephantine.

Like the show's centerpiece and most monumental work, *Primary Encounter (pink tensions)*, everything here had the ambition to fit together neatly. In the work, two hulking cubes were gingerly pulled apart (or in the process of being fitted together), one with a rounded hole and the other, a rounded peg. The opacity and heft of the muted pink stone countered the colorful transparency of the nearby plexiglass plinths. Tone and form in *foreplay* spoke to a level of contrived drama in romantic or sexual interaction that does not exist in the world outside the gallery. In this way, the show was cinematic, even gratuitous in its precision and oblique, allusion to Greek idealistic forms. Or, like the female body of advertising, built up by those mathematical men who lay the groundwork for our collective notions of perfect physique and, subsequently, sex (the kind that no one's having).

The gender binary is persistent, even within the liberal greyzone of the art world where an alternative canon—one that includes women and people of color, for instance—is still catching up to male-dominated provenance. With Mahmoud behind the knife and at work in the traditionally masculine labor of stone carving, materials like glass, steel, and stone are welcome diversions from essentialist gendered renderings.

Mahmoud, like Medusa, turns the soft to stone. Sigmund Freud pathologized

the myth of Medusa—she was decapitated by Perseus who used her head as a weapon of war—and made it psychosexual. In his analysis, Freud links Medusa with castration, claiming her face as a point from which boyish terror springs. It seems that for Freud, the allegory of a powerful woman such as Medusa (and perhaps powerful women in general), is more a political threat than anything else. After all, it was Eve who bit the fruit first, who was banished into history as the first evil woman, a temptress like Aphrodite in the garden, or a sexual menace like Medusa with her snakes. In *foreplay*, material and psychosexual drama turned loose the notion that gender has an accompanying aesthetic and behavior, a concept that the ancient Greeks erected countless statues to. Within these bounds, women are framed as either generous in their beauty or destructive in their deviance, a limited sexual imagination that Mahmoud helps to shake free.

1. Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York, NY: New Directions Publ., 1995).

Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985 at the Hammer Museum

**September 15–
December 31, 2017**

Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985, the Hammer’s extensive and momentous contribution to Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, was both a welcome and long overdue survey of an underrepresented generation of Latina and Chicana artists. As if having the foresight that 2017 would prove a turning point for women’s voices, the exhibition was at once prescient and culturally imperative. *Radical Women* was dedicated to an era of extraordinary social and political upheaval during which the oppression of women was actively resisted. It was also during this time that many of the countries represented were subject to military dictatorship. Examining how such realities were filtered through the work of female artists in Latin America and the United States, co-curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta assiduously situated *Radical Women* at the intersection of the political and the corporeal.

Many of the subversive and conceptually-driven gestures seen here—performances, happenings, and interventions—demanded documentation; therefore, the great majority of work in

Radical Women took the form of photography or video. In this respect, the installation veered toward monotony—a problem the savvy exhibition design at times succeeded in mitigating. Nonetheless, *Radical Women* was an eruditely researched and altogether revelatory examination of the urgent desire, indeed necessity, for these artists to forge a new kind of bodily representation, one that could speak on its own terms.

A compelling investigation of this was the show’s opener *Me gritaron negra (they shouted black at me)* (1978), a black and white video projection by Peruvian artist Victoria Santa Cruz. The artist, accompanied by a small chorus, recites a poem through which she recounts the internalization of racial slurs thrown at her during her childhood: “And I hated my hair and fleshy lips,” she orates. In cathartic, songlike cadence she reveals a narrative of self-loathing that gives way to self-realization and liberation: “I don’t step back anymore (Finally!), I move forward with confidence (Finally!),” setting the exhibition’s tone of defiance and self-possession.

The notion of the female body as physical and metaphorical terrain is explored in the adjoining gallery, most overtly in *Epidermic Scapes* (1977/1982) by Brazilian artist Vera Chaves Barcellos. The massive floor-level grid is comprised of 30 black and white extreme close-up photographs of skin, contrasted to the point of resembling aerial views of arid regions. If Chaves

Barcellos uncannily renders the skin terrestrial, the neighboring *Corazon de roca con sangre (Rock heart with blood)* (1975) by Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta hypnotically fuses body and earth. The grainy Super 8 film shows a nude Mendieta kneeling beside a figure-shaped depression into which she ritualistically pours a bright red liquid to match the placement of her heart (a red-painted rock) before lying face down in it. Against the hard earth her bare, soft body reminds us of its vulnerability and inevitable finitude.

Compared to Colombian María Evelia Marmolejo, however, Mendieta’s meditations seem positively anodyne. While *Radical Women* clearly aims at surveying iconoclasm, Marmolejo takes her performance-based practice to an extreme. Her *Anónimo 4 (Anonymous 4)* (1984) is a video of a performance in which the artist tied decaying placentas from recent births to her body and wrapped herself in plastic, later ripping the materials from her body in a ritualized grieving of the poverty and suffering she is certain the newborns will inevitably endure.

In seeming contrast to this crucible of carnal consequence, the exhibition’s final room hints at the liberating potentials of sexual pleasure. However, the takeaway from Columbian Feliza Bursztyn’s *Cama (Bed)* (1974), a gyrating machine draped in red satin, is not sensual union but the brute mechanics of sex. Even more suggestive and

not without humor is Brazilian Lygia Pape's *Eat Me* (1975), a projection of a lipsticked mouth surrounded by facial hair. It is difficult to tell, perhaps intentionally so, whether it belongs to a disguised woman or a bearded man. As the glossy lips part and pucker the work oozes sexuality while upending gender roles.

Undoubtedly, *Radical Women* will serve as an important chronicle that deftly traced commonalities among 120 geographically and chronologically separate artists. Such extensiveness, however, resulted in an overly dense and at times fatiguing installation. Still, the unification of so many overlooked female artists from Latin America makes clear that this exhibition barely scratched the surface of the larger, worldwide exclusion of artists based on gender alone, leaving one with the sad realization that *Radical Women* was just a drop in an ocean of omissions. Those untold stories can't come soon enough.

Hannah Greely and William T. Wiley at Parker Gallery

November 12, 2017–
January 27, 2018

Upon entering Parker Gallery, set in an Old Hollywood-style mansion at the base of Griffith Park, the first thing that caught one's eye was Hannah Greely's *A Leg to Stand On* (all works 2017). The artist positioned a cheetah print doggie in the foyer, next to the staircase; its front

left leg is amputated, its nub propped on a short and skinny white plinth. The canine looked forward towards the ground—bored, cynical, embarrassed, jaded? Perhaps an alternative title could have been *A Dog to Stand In*? The humbled hound, still standing and pointing ahead: a metaphor for the majority? Greely put out a complex kitschy vibe that began with this somewhat stewing watch guard and permeated throughout the house, seductive at first, then cautionary.

In the room to the right sat *The Picnic*, an isolated scene of romance and trauma. An oversized male arm descends from beneath a beach umbrella; his hand rests beside a forlorn, lobotomized blonde looking away from the giant man's reach. A spider sidesteps a basket on the blanketed lawn and goes after the intruder. The peculiar combination of materials ranges from the industrial (PVC, Aqua-Resin, fiberglass) to the crafty (chicken wire, Velcro, and tempera). This setting could have be read as the lamentation of a ruined relationship; yet the contemporary Me Too and Time's Up movements add extra layers of pain to the portrayal.

Nearby was *L-O-V-E*, a sweet and wonky clan of animated denim-clad letters, stuffed with doodad organs, holding each other's hands and spelling out the work's title. One could assume that this grouping is a nuclear family. But they could easily be three friends or even in a polyamorous relationship, as depicted by a spirited and unruly maker. It is a tired

art-historical trope to channel one's inner-child, but this work did not feel satirical or sanctimonious like so many other youth-inspired gimmicks do. Instead, the jankily-molded chained gang felt authentically innocent and alien.

The lone wall-hanging work of the exhibition, *City Bits*, was a relief made up of compartmentalized boxes (that also serve as buildings and a bridge) housing some of the artist's personal belongings. Books, such as *Death in Venice* and *The Plague*, sit above more spiders and other sundry species and pieces that fit snugly within their designated enclosures. In the center of the bridge, the word "Coolio" advertises itself as an awkwardly apt descriptor co-opted for the urban diorama that Greely has created. The artist has an innate, idiosyncratic ability to highlight the slippery slope between comfort and corniness when it comes to nostalgia, and she does so with frequency. She confidently wavers between highbrow and lowbrow, airing her interests and influences, while shunning the notion of "guilty pleasures."

Upstairs was a concise yet cohesive collection of the work of William T. Wiley. Anchoring the intimate exhibition was *Movement to Black Ball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)* (1968). The piece is composed of a gold-leafed rubber tricycle tire resting atop a large ball consisting of black friction tape—the head of a dark-skinned angel—perched on a wooden stool. A typed and signed note leans against the



William T. Wiley, *Movement to Black Ball Violence (Homage to Martin Luther King)* (1968). Black friction tape, wooden stool, gold leaf, rubber tricycle tires, carved wood log by H.C. Westermann, paper and tape on board, linoleum flooring, 50 x 24 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.



Hannah Greely, *The Picnic* (2017). PVC, cardboard, canvas, chicken wire, velcro, aqua resin, fiberglass, hydrostone, gesso and tempera, 42 × 42 × 55 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.



David Hockney, *Man in Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964). Acrylic on canvas, 65 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 65 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Image courtesy of the artist and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

stool; in it, Wiley explains that the objective of the piece is for viewers to add black friction tape to the black ball, or to hire those in need of work to do so, until the anniversary of Dr. King's death. Upon the anniversary, Wiley would donate the results to "an appropriate person or place." At some point, an amendment had been made: The ball would be added to until it "achieves the proper proportions." There was no way of telling what the proportions looked like in years past, but they appeared to be quite proper here. As for an appropriate place? An open bedroom in a domestic gallery, accessible to the public, is a pretty good fit for now.

On the walls hung four paintings: *Pre-Tsunami Abstraction with Migraines* (2011), *Angry Angels* (2017), *Pay Gun Totems Black Ball* (2017), and *Cosmic's Cull* (2017). Wiley has been known to deploy a wily use of language, and it is in effect within the titling of these wall works, bonded by a black-and-white actionist aesthetic. One work contains a portion of a pyramid splitting the picture's composition in half, with the phrase "So The Missing Corner / The Kissing Mourner" floating freely. These words harkened back to the romance and trauma of Greely's *The Picnic* on the ground floor, but with less spunky explicitness; rather, they projected more of a sullen resilience.

In each room downstairs, Greely demonstrated a self-assured commitment to remaining a wild child amid the rapid flow of tepid

trends. She has a patience that often seems lost among many trying to make it in today's world. On the floor above, Wiley—over twice her age—flaunted an admirable attempt at preserving a whimsical practicality while also trying to hold on to the heaviness of the world. There is an arguable futility to this sort of act, which is likely why so few (in either generation) are willing to make the effort. Yet, despite the gap in age and aesthetics, both artists address the social and political with a dark witticism and intense vigor, with Greely couching her concerns in playfully subversive visual language and Wiley taking a more sobering approach. These artists each exude a wonderfully unconventional wisdom; and for its part, the gallery did the same by pairing an exuberant talent with a venerable and vulnerable pedagogue.

David Hockney at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (L.A. in N.Y.)

**November 27, 2017–
February 25, 2018**

Some unfortunate personal planning landed this writer at The Met one day between Christmas and New Year's when the line for admission wrapped around the building's exterior facade. Upon entrance and on my way to the Hockney show I was there to review, a crowd control measure directed us flushed,

teeming unfortunates through the 19th century painting galleries in order to reach the temporary exhibitions. Even when viewing art body-to-body, the ordained progression of painting is hard to miss with Matisse, Gauguin, Bonnard, and Braque forming a robust chain of Genius antecedents to Hockney. I would finally manage to squeeze into the exhibition after navigating the velvet roped lines for the even more famous gay painter down the hall, Michelangelo.

The exhibition's old-school objective to reify Hockney's status as a master would have been transparent even without the close proximity of the hallowed halls of 19th century painting—for this, a "major retrospective" that "honors the artist in his 80th year." Spanning the years 1960 to 2017, *David Hockney* is more or less arranged so that each room is dedicated to a different period, à la Picasso. The galleries move from early work pre- and post-art school to the Los Angeles paintings to monumental portraits to landscapes from the '80s through the present. Each tidy grouping compels viewers to feel that they have mastered an understanding of every crucial stage in the evolution of Hockney's work.

Yet, even in the stalest of curatorial formats, Hockney's work pushes against its restraints. Rather than framing the show as the result of a tidily progressing aesthetic, I am interested in further exploring a through line of messiness. Hockney didn't play by the rules, he

wasn't tidy, and he was consistently irreverent with his materials across a long career. Even in the more polished works, Hockney pushes against perfection and rewards close looking with errant drips, dabs, and bleeds.

The biggest surprise of the exhibition is Hockney's early work, made in the first few years of the '60s while he was a student at the Royal College of Art in London. Many of the pieces address Hockney's queer identity with an exceptionally *laissez-faire* attitude, considering the time—homosexuality wasn't decriminalized in Britain until 1967, seven years after Hockney himself had come out. The standout in the exhibition's first gallery is *Cleaning Teeth, Early Evening (10pm) W11* (1962), in which two worm-like, cartoonish, and primary-colored figures are caught mid-act in a 69 position with Colgate tube erections squirting wavy lines of toothpaste into each others' mouths. Here, Hockney employs a technique that will crop up again and again: the striped patterning at the top, perhaps meant to resemble bed covers, messily brushes over onto the white ground occupied by the figures. Hockney often disregards borders such that objects are left without enclosing lines or boundaries, one thing bleeding into another.

In two well-known paintings from 1967, made after Hockney had moved to L.A., he again doesn't fully circumscribe his objects. In the pool painting *A Bigger Splash* (1967), the chartreuse brush strokes that compose

the diving board messily trail over the board's top edge just like the striped bedsheets in *Cleaning Teeth*. In *The Room, Tarzana* (1967), a reclining man with a carefully rounded ass occupies the center of the composition, but the edge of the blue pillow below his head has the same unresolved border. In the room's corner, the leg of a green table pools out into the blue carpet. Even in works that seem carefully composed and especially neat, Hockney allows for unbuttoned moments where the medium can be imperfect.

Especially captivating are the early works that employed geometric grids, such that they simultaneously encompassed two styles of painting in one. In *Man in Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964), a male figure bends over in an elaborately tiled shower that takes on the qualities of a clumsy Agnes Martin. While messy brushstrokes compose a male body that lacks clearly articulated fingers or any facial features, Hockney has paid special attention to the shower tiles, even including a crack in one. This piece sets the stage for a career-long insistence on the interchangeableness of "abstraction" and "representation." Hockney has painted the abstraction of the shower tiles with detailed specificity while the representational figure is rendered with brushy patches of paint.

In *Medical Building* (1966), Hockney has transposed his tiled bathroom into a steel and glass office building at the center of the composition that looks like a grid painting dropped into a SoCal landscape. His

irreverent attitude toward containers is again evident in the way that the building's glass-pane-squares drip and smudge into one another.

This exhibition's aim of securing Hockney's place as the rightful heir of Western Painting flattens the complexities of his work and does it an injustice. Even within the space of a traditional retrospective, I wonder what could have been gained from a more extended meditation on Hockney's quirks, the pieces that didn't quite fit, and the transitions between series. *David Hockney* should have taken more cues from David Hockney's own dedication to avoiding the stifling effect of neatly enclosed boundaries and reductive containers.

Edgar Arceneaux at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

December 1, 2017–
March 25, 2018

Edgar Arceneaux's presentation at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) in San Francisco consists of only a small selection of high-impact works. The exhibition opens with the *Library of Black Lies* (2016). The *Library* is housed in a small cabin-like structure with slatted walls and low ceilings. Narrow corridors are girded by mirrored bookshelves arranged in a labyrinthine twist. Strewn on the shelves are books made ancient—awash in black, though charred, or partially encased in a crystalline crust. Most of



55



Edgar Arceneaux, *Library of Black Lies* (2016) (installation view). Image courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Charlie Villyard.

Edgar Arceneaux, *Until, Until, Until...* (2015–2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Charlie Villyard.

the titles are obscured, but of the ones you can catch there are satirical twists on the art historical canon (Germano Celant's *Arte Povera*; now *Fart Poverty*), or books whose names have been similarly tweaked into new significance (Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* has become *Framing Greyness: The Ashy Film on African Americans*; René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* now is a *Discourse on Madness*). This only resembles a library insofar as it is a collection of media. Through spatial and formal means, and incisive satire, Arceneaux has created a library that asks knowledge to be built by reassessment and reassembly of logic, of history, and of identity.

All while winding about in the library, the fanfare of *Until, Until, Until...* (2015–2017) rips through the walls from a darkened doorway at the back of the gallery. The voice of Johnny Carson: “I’m sure as you know at the turn of the century it was a segregated theater. And a black man in order to appear in a white man’s show had to put on a black face so no one would know. And one of the giant stars of that era in the Ziegfeld was Bert Williams... Here tonight to play tribute to Bert Williams is Ben Vereen.”

Until, Until, Until..., which debuted at Performa 15, is based on actor Ben Vereen’s 1981 performance for President Ronald Reagan’s inaugural ball. Vereen’s two-part production, inspired by famed vaudevilian Bert Williams, opened with a minstrel act—black-

face and all. In the second act, Vereen sheds his blackface makeup and sings Williams’s “Nobody”—a conclusion meant as a criticism aimed at the mainly white and conservative gala audience. However, in the airing of the show, Vereen’s second act was edited out in lieu of a song-and-dance number by Donny and Marie Osmond. Vereen was excoriated.

Until, Until, Until... is a retelling of these events. YBCA’s incarnation is an expansion of the scene arranged for the original 2015 performance: an empty bar in the corner, the star-studded stage and, at stage right, an off-kilter vanity with a book—*Nobody*—resting on its edge. Beside the vanity, three spotlighted sequined pedestals wear hats: *Blue Bert*, *Red Ronnie*, and *Green Vereen* (all 2017). But the focal point is an expanse of sheer curtain bearing the projection of the debut *Until* performance, starring actor Frank Lawson. While watching Lawson’s performance from our seats, we inevitably look through the curtain—through him—to see a television playing distorted footage of Vereen’s 1981 performance. We look back at history through the contemporary. Lawson—who plays himself—Ben Vereen, Ben Vereen as Bert Williams (as well as Donny Osmond in a brief, but sarcastic, *entr’acte* duet) are rendered only as flimsy image and in this incarnation they truly have no body. Their lack of physical presence lends itself to echoing the lyrics of the 1905 song “Nobody,” made famous by Williams, and maybe more

poignantly to a passage from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed everything and anything except me.”

Lawson cycles through rehearsal, performance, and reflection; he slides between personas with a quiet ease that, at times, confounds our ability to identify who he is in any given moment. We ride cascades of expression: sorrow becoming jest, jest twisting into pride, pride to shame, shame to eagerness to sorrow and so on. Through this blurring of intergenerational figures and stories, Arceneaux has constructed *Until, Until, Until...* as a hopeful redemption for a misunderstood moment and a resonant criticism of the present.

Now, history is an efficient and old machine, repeating its motions—the same stories—over and over despite being broken and rarely accepting new parts. And, just as we consume media, we consume the stories of history, however edited. Arceneaux’s presentation at YBCA is a reminder of the hysterics of a myopic history. That our consumption in every sense is not passive, it is a constant reconstitution of knowledge; it is both a performance for the present and a cross-examination between past and future.

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