

Binoculars on the Brain

Lyndon Barrois Jr.

“Presence emphasizes space much more than time . . . [something] of which we have immediate sensual perceptions. Presence in this sense does not exclude time, but it always binds time to a particular place.”

—Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*



Lyndon Barrois Jr. *Wet Dream Cousin*, Ink on canvas, archival pigment print, oak frames, 2017

A Most Suitable Demonstration

The premise of this project, from which the show takes its name,¹ came at a time in which my approach to making was shifting. I was beginning to adopt an assemblaged quality I so admired in the work of other artists, and I became increasingly interested in the space between objects, and how those objects are informed by their relationship to one another. I was solidifying the belief that the experience of art should reflect the experience of life, where the mundane neighbors the magical, where the popular compliments the obscure. More and more, my studio practice—much like my observations in life—is one of connecting dots across contexts, and this act of connecting for me is crucial to establishing presence; to actively bear witness allows for engagement with the current of time passing.

¹ “Almost Now, Just Then...” originated as a hypothetical curatorial concept featuring work from Thom Browne, Susan Collis, Theaster Gates, David Huffman, Victor Man, Pietro Roccasalva, Haim Steinbach, and Allison Smith. A separate essay of the same name accompanies the initial version of the hypothetical exhibition.

It did not occur to me then that the pitch for this exhibition was a constellation of constellations, a sort of meta construction that exponentially builds on the already constellatory structure of group exhibitions. So the opportunity for audience discovery is exponential, from the micro associations from each artist, to the macro-interpretation of the show as a whole.

As it pertains to these particular artists in this particular city, the show is a call for conceptual rigor in commercial space(s). A material gesture to propose a desired reality. To make work in such a way, and consequently an exhibition, is to posit one's expectation of acceptance. The way in which one participates in the arts is to construct a context of art in which one wishes to exist. Perhaps artworks, like exhibitions, are demonstrations of things we want, either questions we have or ones we want answered.

Random Access

The complexity of a situation can be viewed in relation to the stars in that we can never see them as they are, only as they *were*;² what is seen at present is the cumulative representation of past activity. The *light* of an image is a product of the fusions that took place en route to *now*. The current moment, as a fleeting and constantly fluctuating concept of time, is dependent upon the relationship between remembrance and anticipation. *Now* is the experience of past, present, and future simultaneously and constantly. What we experience is only the *illusion* of stillness. Walter Benjamin, in reflecting on time and history in relation to images states, "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."³

This illusion of the still also applies to static objects. They are psychologically charged, accumulating the residue of history, and thus remain active. This is increasingly more applicable as we devote more time to digital mechanics, since the continuous flow of energy to keep virtual platforms running has been rendered invisible. This is not so unfamiliar when one considers the unseen and unconscious activity taking place in our bodies. It is interesting that many devices we have come to depend on share the names of things that either occur in, or are performed through, our bodies. We speak of things as having drives, we interface with virtual desktops, deal in cloud storage, draw from memory, and hope our motors keep running. As analog and digital virtues are in constant contest, it becomes useful to reflect on these biotechnical intersections. Regardless of the entity in question, we can argue with great conviction that there is a dependency on memory to perform in the world efficiently.

² Thinking about light years here, and the time it takes for the light of a star to reach our vision. Stars as we see them are actually older representations of their image.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002), 262.



Addoley Dzegede. *Constellation of My Genealogy*, Indigo and fiber-reacted dyed Batik, photo transfers, indigo frames, 2017

Afro-presentism

Though the exhibition is built on a constellatory framework and showcases works by black artists, it would be limiting to assume Afrofuturism as the primary point of inquiry. Of course I acknowledge the question of black existence in a hypothetical future, especially one of advanced technology, perhaps achieving habitation on other planets. I also add my own register of frustration towards fictions of rogue white protagonists surrounded by other species, in many cases portrayed by actors of color in alien drag. As it pertains to art, I also recognize the excitement of crafting the image of oneself (or occupying the psychological space) within cosmic content. In what other case can you imagine navigating the world(s) with an agency you have not experienced in your daily reality? Despite this very logical and arguably cathartic tendency, I am finding that the playspace that Afrofuturist discourse offers has become increasingly frustrating; I have grown suspicious of continuously situating myself in an unforeseeable future, sitting solely in fiction. Rather than illustrating a hope for the future, I am more interested in demonstrating a desired present.

To be clear, I am not deriding a framework that has, and continues to bring me great joy. I am merely poking at the complex nature of needing your own space without being enclosed within it. In our still active *nomenclature*,⁴ the impulse to name a thing empowers while it excludes. So as we have made strides to emancipate our image and expand the stories for which we are heroes, there has been the construction of yet another consequential box to put us in.

⁴ My term. Observing the cultural compulsion to name something to easier make sense of it.



Jen Everett. *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning*, Framed pigment prints, 17 x 21 inches (each), 2017

From Ectochrome to Kotachrome

Images hold power. Beyond their ability to attract and allure, alert and inform, is their ability to manipulate our sense of conviction. The presence of a lens-based visual record proposes an indisputable fact, and while the context of an image may be a mystery, the artifact stands in as evidence, unless proven otherwise.

Images bring us closer to the past. To mine the past through photography is a way of hybridizing the idea of the deceased with the processing of an image. We can consider the past as a kind of death, as time sets in motion the process of degradation in its passing. The production of an object becomes a form of counteracting the inevitable, not in the interest of immortality, but as a means of providing insight to our condition. Perhaps we can identify the ways in which an image can serve as a resurrector of information, in the same way that material or manufacturing processes carry within them the spirit of those that have put them to use. I do not mean to confuse this with nostalgia; there is a level of sentimentality, but a greater interest in *learning*, rather than *longing* for a past not experienced. The inquiry and investigation into the past as we negotiate the future is in the service of the contemporary.

I am accustomed to discussing objects as forms of imagery as well, and that transitional space—the shift from image to object and back, is for me, quite electric. I think of the charlatans, appropriately known as mediums, through which we had the procuring of ectoplasm, the materialization of paranormal presence that only they could facilitate. This served to capitalize on the desperate need for the living to access the dead, and this creative production, artfully so, provided material supply for emotional and existential demand. We can not underestimate the amount of foresight, research, and practice of pace, to match matter with affect for a committed audience. These were gestures of great intention, both situationist performances and the deposition of an art object. For what is art if not a means to make haptic sense of conditions we do not fully understand?