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The Politics of Pleasure Installation

Studio, Thursday 19 – Sunday 22 July

The Politics of Pleasure Installation identifies, centres, and creates a space in celebration of representations of Black women manifesting their presence and signifying and participating in pleasure. Drawing inspiration from Tina M. Campt's *Listening to Images* and Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, the central piece in the installation, a video work, assembles extracts from Black feminist theory, music videos, photography, and stock imagery. The video is shown on multiple displays and situated in an environment that invites extended viewing and participation, with viewing stations and a 'pleasure altar' inspired by Black girls' bedrooms. The installation is a project by The Politics of Pleasure, a multidisciplinary Black feminist collective investigating how Black women engage in pleasure as a politics of refusal. The Politics of Pleasure collective is formed of ICA Assistant Curator Ifeanyi Awachie, researcher Rita Gayle and historian and ethnographer Nydia A. Swaby.

To create the video work, The Politics of Pleasure collective gathered images that they exchanged in the course of discussing what Black female pleasure looks like. To source these images, the collective relied on stock photos. They discovered that it was difficult to find beautiful, high-resolution images of Black women experiencing pleasure. The few images they found featured normative subjects, i.e. those whose appearances could be read as 'femme', 'hip', 'young', and 'thin'. Though they sought to reflect categories of Black women not typically represented in artistic and cultural spaces, the collective found few images of older women, trans women, differently-abled women, women whose 'larger' bodies are treated as outside of the 'norm', women whose self representation could be read as 'queer,' masculine women, Muslim women, African women, rural women or poor women. Of the few inclusive images they did find, only a small number showed these subjects experiencing pleasure. By including stock photos in the video work, the collective aims to share more broadly these rare images of Black female pleasure and acknowledge the absence of nuanced representations of Black women.

The collective mined the work of Black feminist theorists such as Gail Lewis, Alice Walker and Kiyan Williams, extracting quotes dealing with the concepts of pleasure and presence. They imposed the excerpts onto backgrounds whose colours match those in the photos and video clips. This process of colour-matching references a function of Instagram which allows the user to identify hex codes for the colours in a photo and produce type in the same colour. This borrowed practice relates to conversations about pleasure and Black image production in the digital age, which are explored in the quotes and images shown.

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The video work also includes excerpts from four music videos: Brenda Fassie's 'Vulindela' (1997); Whitney Houston's 'I'm Every Woman' (1992); Solange Knowles' 'Don't Touch My Hair' (2016); and Laura Mvula's 'Phenomenal Woman' (2016). The music videos are considered by the Politics of Pleasure collective — and, they imagine, much of the global Black female community — to be major moments in pop culture when Black women musicians have represented individual and collective pleasure in ways that drew significant attention and appeal. Houston's feteing of her fellow Black female musician, musical icon Chaka Khan, is centred in the clips chosen from 'I'm Every Woman'. The video is also included for its representation of intergenerational Black women relating to each other as well as the viewer in exuberant ways. 'Don't Touch My Hair' evokes ideas about play through its use of clothing, style and movement, even as it articulates a charged racial experience and conveys a message about self-protection, self-preservation, and self-care. 'Vulindela' bursts with communal celebration and the iconic South African performer's trademark expressive vigour. The song-text bears the light-hearted theme of a son's wedding even as Fassie challenges the heteronormative order with the masculine costume she wears for part of the performance. The video also creates a link across generations and borders with 'Phenomenal Woman,' the song by Black British musician Laura Mvula, which plays on loop in the Installation. Mvula's video, shot in Cape Town, contains similar visual elements to those captured in 'Vulindela'.

The videos, images and text are arranged such that the occurrence of particular colours acts as a thread stringing the visuals together. In being led by colour and visual thinking rather than any discursive ideology, the collective aimed to reject problematic ideologies imposed on Blackness through discursive, written forms. The photos are generally arranged such that individual subjects are portrayed first, followed by collective subjects, an order which privileges images of pleasure experienced with the self which then evolve into images of pleasure experienced with others. This relates to feminist theories of (erotic) pleasure as something for Black women to experience 'for themselves' and 'not necessarily for the fulfillment of a (male) partner,' and also testifies to the ways in which the Black women imaged in the video work share pleasure with others.

On the evening of Thursday, 19th July and during The Politics of Pleasure Workshop on Sunday, 22nd July, the Installation will also display a live Twitter feed featuring images of Black female pleasure contributed by visitors to the installation. To contribute, please tweet an image with hashtag #fugitivefeminism.

Credits: Afropunk, Alice Walker, Brenda Fassie, Gail Lewis, Jennifer Nash, Kiyann Williams, Laura Mvula, Momtaza Mehri, Solange Knowles, Tumblr, Urban Outfitters, Whitney Houston