

Deborah-Joyce Holman



ICA Theatre, Thursday 24 March, 7pm

A new two-channel moving image work documenting two performers reciting excerpts of the seminal *Cinéma Vérité* film *Portrait of Jason* by Shirley Clarke. Meditating on Black and queer subjecthood and portraiture in visual cultures, this work employs cinematographic tools from a wide range of reference points such as *Cinéma Vérité*, social media and popular culture and employs repetition and opacity in order to retain agency.

Q&A

Where did the initial idea for your new work come from?

I read an essay by Tavia Nyong'o a couple years ago called 'Crushed Black'. It's a chapter of his book *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018), which has informed my practice a lot. In this specific chapter, Nyong'o considers the 1967 *Cinéma Vérité* film *Portrait of Jason* by Shirley Clarke through its technical faults, such as crushed blacks and blur, which allow spaces for the agency of the film's protagonist Jason Holliday. I couldn't shake the film after watching it, as I was taken aback by how violent and extractive it is, and felt I needed to engage with it in some way through my own work.

This project has grown out of two endeavors or questions: on one hand, I'm expanding on my engagement with tactics of refusal, non-performance, and other aspects of a positioning in opposition to the short-sighted and insufficient logic of Black representation that the Black struggle for liberation is co-opted into. And on the other hand, I hope it can be an amplification and an act of solidarity with Jason.

How does moving image fit into your practice and what do you explore in your practice more broadly?

I work with different media. A lot of my work has been object- or text-based. In 2020, I was commissioned to make a moving image work, which was the first time I even ever thought about it. I'm interested in exploring the limitations and possibilities of whichever medium I'm working with at that moment, so I was intrigued to work through moving image and to explore what questions arise through the process. In working with moving image, one aspect that I really enjoy is how collaborative the nature of it is and how much space there is to consider the process of working together, which

hopefully informs the work, though this is sort of a project away from what is made explicit in the work itself.

As of the last couple of years I've been thinking about notions of refusal, especially in relation with visual culture and popular media. This has been the red thread of my practice, conceptually and formally. With object- and text-based works, I've been turning away from portraiture or figuration. I was interested in what would happen when that entry point is denied and a more in-depth engagement with this buzzword 'identity' is required. With moving image, I feel much more drawn to feature people, which has led me to consider ways to approach this with the same questions of refusal and illegibility.

Do you feel like there's a direct connection to some of your other work that you've made?

With this project, I was thinking about the refusal enacted by acts of recital and repetition. This includes engagements with notions of time in terms of non-linearity and cross-temporal engagement with Jason Holliday and Shirley Clarke's portrait of him. My more recent works include asemic text drawings, which were on view at Yaby in Madrid in 2021, and cardboard cut-outs painted with layers of black bitumen paint, *Untitled (for scale)*, exhibited in a group exhibition that's just closed at Kunstverein Last Tango in Zurich. With the former, I was exploring language, slipperiness and illegibility, which were things I was again coming back to when working on the script, and approaching multidisciplinary artist Rebecca Bellantoni, who also made a film for Image Behaviour, and artist, writer and curator Imani Mason Jordan for the performances of it. With the latter, I was interested in the circulation of images of Black people, non-performance as acts of refusal and opacity, which are themes I've definitely had on my mind when working on this project.

Can you talk about the process of making this work?

I wanted to make a two-channel installation with one actor on each screen. They would engage either in dialogue or monologue that would overlap at points. While working on the dialogue, I returned to *Portrait of Jason*. After conversations with my friend Noémi Michel, a brilliant writer, academic and critic based in Geneva, I grew very interested in the moments where Jason declares himself to be XYZ, like, 'I'm a lazy cat', 'I'm a stone whore', 'I'm a truth teller', as well as those where he promises to go into speaking about his suffering and his trauma as prompted by Shirley Clarke and Carl Lee off camera without getting into it. I decided to transcribe only these specific moments, and to build the rest of the film from there, led by the words, by Rebecca's and Imani's performances.

Was the process of working with a script and performers new?

That was definitely new. I was interested in working with the two performers, Rebecca Bellantoni and Imani Mason Jordan, because they have a practice of refusal or complicating 'representation', as well as a specific relationship to performing for camera. It was important to me that I have a personal relationship with both of the performers, so that there is an element of trust and they would feel comfortable just walking off camera if they need to. The rehearsals with Rebecca, whose voice I am just completely floored by, have contributed a lot in the final stages of the film. They both bring something really, really different to the work.

Do you think the link to the film *Portrait of Jason* is important for people to know?

Yeah. One of the reasons I wanted to engage with the 1967 film *Portrait of Jason* now, in 2022, was because the film really exemplifies a mainstream appetite for Black trauma on camera, which speaks to our times, too. It emphasises the voyeurism on the part of Shirley Clarke, as well as audiences, and the mythification of Jason at the hands of the white filmmaker who cut the 1 hour 47 minute film together from 12 hours' worth of footage. These are all very contemporary and ongoing issues – we've all seen how June 2020 was fuelled, the demand for trauma porn that ensued and the short-sighted, empty gestures of making Black folk 'more visible' across the mainstream as well as in the arts. So, as much of my practice, with this project I was interested in working through a complicated relationship with visibility, performance and portraiture, through the cracks in Jason's performance – not those where the supposed 'true' him comes out, but those where he refuses to be pinned down and counters his capture.

Deborah-Joyce Holman is a multidisciplinary artist based in London, UK, and Basel, Switzerland. Holman employs a variety of media in her practice, such as text, sculpture, installation, film- and image-making. Holman's work has recently been shown at Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2022); Last Tango, Zurich (2022); Unfinished Live, The Shed, New York City & House of Electronic Arts, Basel (2021); 7th Athens Biennial (2021); TransBona-Halle, Basel (2021); Kiefer Hablitzel Prize nomination exhibition, Basel (2021); Conceptual Fine Arts Live, Milano (2021); Cherish, Geneva (2021); Yaby, Madrid (2021); Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2021); La Quadriennale di Roma (2020); Material Art Fair, Mexico City (2020); A Soft Spiral (solo), Mikro, Zurich (2019); Fondation Entreprise Ricard, Paris (2019); Auto Italia, London (2019); Live In Your Head, Geneva (2018); Alienze, Lausanne (2018); OSLO10, Basel (2017); Locale Due, Bologna (2016), among others. As part of her curatorial practice, she worked as Associate Director (2020–21) and as Associate Curator (2021–22) at East London arts organisation Auto Italia. She is the founding director of 1.1, a platform for early-career practitioners in arts, music and text-based practices, with an exhibition space in Basel, Switzerland, which ran 2015–20. Deborah has curated the 2018 and 2019 annual group exhibitions for Les Urbaines, Lausanne.