

Dress Up, Speak Up: Regalia and Resistance



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Examining the evolution of self and society through the lens of history's influence—both documented and unseen—is the central confrontation animating the exhibition. Working with a wide range of media and subject matter, the artists adopt and adapt historical sources to address how discrimination and injustice have shaped both identity and its artistic representation. Reimagining, restaging, and re-performing imagery from Renaissance painting to present-day media, these artists expose the gaps and fissures in both art and history, illuminating the mutable nature of personal and collective memory to redefine cultural visibility.

Cover: April Bey
COLONIAL SWAG: If You Meet Me As a \$100 Bitch Me Supposed to be a \$150 Bitch by Next Week, 2023
Jacquard woven textiles, with hand-sewn fabric and sequins



Bedecked and bejeweled, the figures populating *Dress Up, Speak Up* occupy fluid space and time, evoking past and present, fact and fiction, memory and desire, to illuminate the complexity of contemporary identity. Whether clad in the stylized garb of Enlightenment-era Europe, the traditional coverings of ancient religious tradition, or the gender-bending bling of popular culture, these representations of self and other role-play in real time, reach back through history to address prevailing personal, social, and political challenges. Inspired by allegory, autobiography, art history, and fantasy, this pantheon of provocative and prophetic personages are adorned to confront, transform, and redefine cultural visibility.

The finery utilized to dress up and speak up often consists of everyday materials. Raúl de Nieves gathers thousands of plastic beads and other discarded, commercially produced materials to fashion his evocative *Somos Monstros* [*We are Monsters*] figure, while Jody Paulsen's hand-crafted felt collages recall the playful hobbies of childhood, a practice he employs to reveal and explore personal and cultural identity. Paulsen expands his narrative into a call to action in *Find Your Gaggle*, a monumental group portrait celebrating queer experience, relationships, and community. Childhood play also inspired Beverly McIver's *Doll* paintings. The pigtailed toy featured in these self-portraits emerged from memory: once a plaything that comforted and entertained her, the doll now serves as metaphor and material for the artist—an image that both represents McIver's identity, and acts as a protective talisman, helping the artist to resist self-doubt. Combining play and spectacle, Yvonne Osei says her video, *EXTENSIONS* “reveals the apparatus, culture, and methodology of hair braiding in Ghana. Characterized by Afrobeat music blasting in the streets, the video shows two hairdressers with their assistants braiding a woman's hair in front of Sister Pokua Beauty

Parlor, a small kiosk salon at a busy corner in Asafo, a town in Kumasi, Ghana. A spectacle is created in public as the sitter's indigo-colored extensions stretch out several yards into the Asafo community. Hair in the black community is an important asset that speaks of heritage, community, beauty, womanhood, and sisterhood. The video celebrates craftsmanship, highlights teamwork, and reveals the labor and conversations that take place in black spaces that cultivate beauty. Through hair braiding, this Ghanaian woman becomes the center of attention in Asafo.”



Yvonne Osei
Extensions, 2018 (still)
One-channel video, color, sound, running time 1:00 minute

Performance as resistance and revelation is source and subject matter for Wilmer Wilson IV. In his photographic self-portraits Wilson enacts and performs resistance: he covers his body with “I Voted” stickers to express his struggle to fully participate in this democratic process, and in postage stamps for his performance as Henry Box Brown, an American slave who shipped himself to freedom. Adopting a second skin, both physically and metaphorically, Wilson exchanges his individuality to embody a symbol of struggle for civil rights—to be free, to vote, to be heard.

The lace covering Berni Searle’s face and upper body is both decorative and symbolic, recalling ceremonial body ornament and tattoos; her gold hands are not gloved, but painted with metallic leaf, transformed into icons, relics living on a living body. Searle’s Lament images capture the artist’s staging of *Shimmer*, which she performed in the town hall of Bruges, Belgium, a Gothic building that was elaborately refurbished by King Leopold II, the brutal colonialist ruler of the African Congo (he ordered the severing of hands from colonists who failed to meet his rubber quotas). Adorning herself in lace and gold leaf, Searle inhabits, mourns, and resurrects lost lives, while embodying and expanding symbolic access to the space she occupies: her veiled figure may be a citizen or saint, Muslim or Christian, European or African.

While directly invoking Christian iconography and Biblical narratives, Gaela Erwin’s self-portraits combine the sacred and the secular in what she describes as “an investigation of gender roles in contemporary society and the influence of Christian religious symbols as a source of inquiry.” *Self-Portrait as Mater Dolorosa* is part of Erwin’s *Martyr* series, which presents the artist as various saints, both male and female, with images of the source of their martyrdom depicted with a Renaissance-like portrait. Here, Mary, mother of Christ, appears above her doomed infant son in utero, the tear on her cheek foreshadowing his fate and her sorrow. *Erwin’s Self-Portrait (with Ostrich*



Gaela Erwin
Self-Portrait (with Ostrich Egg) and Twelve Apostles, 2018-2020
 Oil on canvas

Egg) and Twelve Apostles, includes likenesses of male colleagues and friends, as well as of the artist, posed as Christ and holding an ostrich egg. “This work bears theistic hallmarks of European Christian art,” explains the artist. “The Christ-like pose and hand gestures are borrowed from iconography of the Catholic Church. The iconic pose of Christ offering a benediction is paired with an ostrich egg held in the other hand.” An amalgam of cultural sources animates portraits by Stephanie Syjuco, who was born in the Philippines. For her *Cargo Cults* photographs, Syjuco swaths herself in patterned fabrics from head to toe, posed, studio-style, in interiors covered in still more layers of black and white textiles.



Jody Paulsen
Find Your Gaggle, 2019
 Felt collage.

The shape-shifting graphics obscure the figure and highlight the designs, which today are associated with “ethnic fashions,” derived from the colonial history of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Upon closer inspection, sales tags from shopping mall stores are discernable on the clothing: the massive consumer trade conducted by GAP, Forever 21, Urban Outfitters, Target, and others, now trace the shipping routes our predecessors traveled, many unwillingly. Overlaid on each of these works is a calibration scale, drawing attention to the practice of identifying “neutral grey.” As critic Charles Desmarais notes, “Stephanie Syjuco wants you to know that, physics aside, images are never neutral.”

The legacies of Anglo-European colonialism and the need for new monuments that reflect the traumas and erased histories are illuminated in works by Jeffrey Gibson and Athi-Patra Ruga. “American history is longer, larger, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it”: this quote from writer James Baldwin is featured in a 2015 wall hanging by Jeffrey Gibson. A Native American artist of Cherokee and Choctaw heritage, Gibson’s recent work explores the material histories and futures of several Indigenous handcraft techniques and aesthetics, including Southeastern River cane basket weaving, Algonquian birch bark biting, and porcupine quillwork. The helmet sculpture included here was created for a 2019 exhibition at New York’s New Museum, entitled “The Anthropophagic Effect.” The phrase is derived from Oswald de Andrade’s legendary 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, which argued that Indigenous communities could “devour” colonizers’ culture as a way to resist and radically transform Western culture. Describing his work as inspired by practices that have long predated the arrival of colonizers on the American continent, the artist says “I engage materials and techniques as strategies to describe a contemporary narrative that addresses the past in order to place oneself in the present and to begin new potential trajectories for the future.”

Ancestral knowledge and practices also inspire Erica Lord, an artist with Indigenous, European, and Asian roots. “My origins include a lineage I was born into, and a land I was removed from,” she explains. “Constant moving and rootlessness are part of the American experience, but my near perpetual movement is an experience that lies within a larger history: the Native diaspora.” The employment of regalia as resistance against erasure is central to that larger history, and is the subject of Lord’s series, *The Codes We Carry: Beads as DNA Data*, which the artist describes as “large-scale beaded sculptures

that incorporate computer-produced genetic data patterns, or DNA/RNA microarrays, from diseases disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities, and transforms them into loom-woven glass bead burden straps as an act of data sovereignty. Combining these culturally relevant Indigenous art forms and beading techniques with DNA analysis raises awareness of the institutionalized health disparities that exist for Native people. DNA microarray assays produce color-coded data in a pixel-like format. The data is replicated using 4mm cube-shaped glass beads precisely loom-woven, with each glass bead representing a data point. Scientific conventions used to organize the data correspond well with the dimensions of Alaskan Athabaskan baby belts or burden straps. Transforming genetic data into a culturally significant form returns this DNA data to the community and makes it tangible and accessible to the marginalized populations it represents.” Like Gibson, Lord seeks “to create dialogue that will help to redefine ourselves, our communities, and our beliefs.”

Gibson, along with Paulsen, Ruga, and Wiley, utilize dress and performance to embody and celebrate the fluidity of sexual identity, resisting the definition and representation of gender as binary. Describing his regal portraits of black men and women, Wiley says, “Ultimately, what I’m doing is jacking history. I’m emptying out the original. It’s almost a type of drag in a way.” Inspired both by street life and scholarship, the artist combines references to police mug shots, 18th- and 19th-century portraiture, and the poses and gestures of European Old Masters. In *Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Million Peasants*, Wiley references a series of propaganda circulated by the Mao Zedong’s Communist Chinese government in 1965. The posters were a call to young people to be trained as medical workers, known as barefoot doctors, which would travel to countryside villages and provide healthcare to rural citizens.



Jakob Kudsk Steensen
Aquaphobia, 2017 (still)
Video installation with sound

Created in homage to an early 20th-century icon of queer culture, Athi-Patra Ruga’s Proposed Model of *François Benga Monument* belongs to the artist’s pantheon of heroes and queens that reflect African beauty and resistance. François “Féral” Benga (1906-1957) was a renowned Senegalese dancer who performed alongside Josephine Baker at the Folies Bergère in Paris, and in New York, became

a muse and model for many artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The son of a wealthy landowner in Dakar, Benga was disinherited as a teenager, and after his death, largely forgotten. Ruga resurrects the performer's legacy with this larger-than-life-size figure covered in flowers and jewels, mounted and lit onstage: a glimmering monument to an influential artist that responds to—and may reframe—the prevailing presence of historical monuments to colonialism and apartheid.

The marginalized populate many of Ebony G. Patterson's lush and layered figure-laden tableaux, which map the contemporary spectacle of identity, both celebrated and hidden. Patterson mines art history, transforming Medieval tapestry and Renaissance portraiture into dizzily vibrant and embellished mixed media to illuminate who and what are visible and not in postcolonial culture. Adorned in bright hues and sparkling sequins, her subjects combine material allure with articulate critique. "My ongoing body of work explores constructions of the masculine within popular culture—while using Jamaican dancehall culture as platform for this discourse," explains the artist. Referring to *Brella Krew* from the *Fambily Series*, Patterson says, "The early work looked at the fashionable practice of skin bleaching, followed by investigations of so-called 'bling culture' and its relationship to the masculine within an urban context. While still making references to dancehall culture, my work raises larger questions about beauty, gender ideals, and constructs of masculinity within so called 'popular black' culture. It examines the similarities and differences between 'camp aesthetics'—the use of feminine gendered adornment—in the construct of the urban masculine within popular culture."

Even when removed from the glitter of nightlife, Patterson's imagery still dazzles, while revealing the underreported brutality and cruel invisibility experienced by communities that are marginalized or ignored. Woven, embroidered,



Kehinde Wiley
Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Peasants, 2007
Oil on canvas, (c) Kehinde Wiley

or appliquéd on textiles displayed on walls and floors are clothes, shoes, toys, and other personal objects; the bodies of their owners are missing, and the viewer is now a witness to their anonymous demise and disappearance. The tragic narrative suggested by *Lily, carnation, rose budz* is that of a child's death, perhaps a drive-by shooting; atop the bright pastel appliqué dotted with pearls and other embellishments is a little girl's tricycle; the small body that fell from it has left only traces of her brief life, now camouflaged into the flowery patterns woven into a fabric garden underfoot. Danger and beauty, life and loss, all lurk within Patterson's garden tableaux, alluding to both current violence and historical erasure. The palette and

title of this particular work echo John Singer Sargent's 1885 painting *Lily, Carnation, Lily, Rose*, an idealized image of Victorian girlhood set in an English garden; Patterson's evocation of Sargent's iconic work offers a poetic, poignant critique of who is valued and visible in life and in art, and illuminates the role that representation plays in perpetuating or challenging systemic discrimination.

"in hell. in, held. inhale. breathe."

The poetic lines incorporated into the title of Fahamu Pecou's *Breathe* articulate the artist's transformation of tragedy into transcendence. One of a series entitled *grav*ity*, which the artist describes as "addressing both contemporary and lingering concerns around race and society using the trend of *saggin'* as an allegory for the tensions that emerge in the identity, performance, and visibility of black men." Here, the young man wearing the loose layers of pants associated with *saggin'* is bent over but not broken, his body weary, yet graceful and strong, seemingly floating in space. The title makes intentional reference to the phrase "We Can't Breathe," which was repeated in protest after Eric Garner's death in police custody in 2014. Pecou says he seeks to "change the phrase from a plea of desperation to one of affirmation," to re-present his subject as beatific, a glowing, iconographic figure, an image of ascension.

"It is the idea of leaving the weight of the world," says Jefferson Pinder, describing his film, *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*. Inspired by a vast array of visual and aural sources including NASA footage and Civil Rights protests from the 1960s, Martin Luther King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, poet Gil Scott Heron's "Whitey on the Moon," *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Right Stuff*, *Apollo 13*, and Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, Pinder stitched together over 2,000 still and moving images to create this work. The news and film reels are projected onto the artist's face and neck, which he has carefully coated in thick



April Bey
 COLONIAL SWAG: *If You Meet Me As a \$100 Bitch Me Supposed to be a \$150 Bitch by Next Week*, 2023
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white paint, evoking Japanese Butoh theater. "I was drawn to its protest sensibilities and how it emerged out of post WWII, post atomic rebels to create these ghosts, these people that have these amazing physical qualities that almost survived outside the body," explains the artist. Pinder's Afrofuturist vision follows the protagonist into space and to a dramatic ending, when, as in the myth of Icarus, a fiery explosion sends him hurtling back to earth. Critic Faedra C. Carpenter writes, "The final moments of this performance video do not echo the utopian vision of the Civil Rights movement,

but rather the grim reality of smoldering smoke and a figure that is still standing after a turbulent ride.” Pinder employs his face as a white canvas to both reflect and project the ongoing impact of racism—presented here as embedded in his skin—and to enact aspirations for transcendence. Fantasy and history bear equal weight in *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*, as the artist is narrating his own reality, asserting “the freedom to liberate [himself] from an identity based upon someone else’s interpretations.”

The idea of space travel as transcendence from discrimination also informs April Bey’s mixed media textile, *COLONIAL SWAG- If You Meet Me As A \$100 Bitch Me Supposed to be a \$150 By Next Week*. The regal figure, rendered here as a Jacquard woven textile in saturated color, is derived from AI; sequins underscore the artifice and power of the fantasy on display. One of numerous works belonging to Bey’s *Atlantica Series*, the image recalls an advertisement, and indeed it is promoting Bey’s fictional fashion brand, Colonial Swag, which the artist describes as a “high-fashion luxury brand on Atlantica that uses fully sustainable, ethically mined colonialism from Earth’s developing countries to create beautiful, priceless pieces of fashion.” Bey credits her father for first envisioning Atlantica for her as a child as a way of explaining racism, telling her that they were descended from extraterrestrial travelers who had come to the Bahamas from another planet called Atlantica. Combining personal experience, memory, and fantasy, Bey critiques American and Bahamian history and culture, and the white supremacy that is a legacy of colonialism. Exuding the notion of swag that the title further highlights, Bey’s queer, diasporic models have eluded systemic oppression; they are free to claim a separate history, and to fully embrace and express their individuality and their value, which is further emphasized in the subtitle here. Bey says that “Atlantica gives

everyone a blank canvas to say, ‘Okay, if I could create my own planet, my own culture, would I even have any need for gender? And how would that look if we just appeared and none of us had any knowledge of race or gender or class or even currency or poverty?’” Reimagining history to envision new futures creates a powerful pathway for resilience and transcendence; For those who inherit a legacy of resisting cultural erasure, telling untold tales—lived, remembered, or imagined—remains vital.

Alice Gray Stites
Chief Curator, Museum Director

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21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

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