POP STARS!

POPULAR CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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April Bey
Power Girl (Incarcerated Queen), 2018
"African" Chinese knock-off wax fabric, hand-sewn into printed canvas with drawing ink, glass beads from Kumasi, Ghana

Superheroes and celebrities, totems and toys: the imagery of manufactured fantasy is reframed in the visual language of historical iconography in this multi-media exploration of popular culture today. With unprecedented access to an audience of one's own, we find affirmation onscreen, and venerate fame as a final destination. As the real and the virtual increasingly collide, boundaries between art and media further blur, inspiring new mythologies realized in new materials: stars of stage, screen, and sport are re-envisioned, offering insight into how desire shapes identity. Appropriating images and practices from commerce, science, politics, religion, sports, and technology, these artists illuminate recent shifts in how culture is being created and consumed.

The legacy of late-20th-century Pop Art is evident throughout the exhibition: Andy Warhol's style and subject matter in particular is echoed in paintings by Rebecca Campbell, Lisa Alonzo, and Mickalene Thomas; in photographs by Hassan Hajjaj and Laurel Nakadate; and in multi-media works by Nick Cave, Roberto Guerrero, R. Luke DuBois, and April Bey, among others. This broad spectrum of artworks investigating celebrity, commerce, and the media suggests an evolving definition of Pop. In the 1960s, says philosopher Arthur Danto, "Pop art was among other things an effort to overcome the division between fine and vernacular art, between the exalted and the coarse, between high and low." *Pop Stars!* demonstrates the dominance of the popular as today's ubiquitous culture. Culling from the canon of art history, mining the mass media, scouring the streets and screens where we live and dream today, these artists, alongside, Brian Paumier, Robert Wilson, Fahamu Pecou, Frances Goodman, Derrick Adams, Titus Kaphar, Sanford Biggers, Brendan Fernandes, and others, enshrine the everyday, and intertwine past and present in transformative new intersections of art and life.

The consumer brands we eat, drink, and wear; the performers, politicians, and athletes we love and loathe: popular culture today venerates the secular more than the sacred, yet the form

and function of religious iconography persists. The saints and angels depicted in ancient icons are today replaced by images of the celebrity gods and consumer goods we seek for affirmation, protection, and empowerment. Recalling the studio photography of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, Hassan Hajjaj's saturated, brightly colored portraits of musicians, cultural icons, and others, are framed by popular brands of food and drink and other commodities typically found in the markets of Marrakesh. Surrounding the figure like altarpiece offerings, the consumer objects are part of the subject's identity.

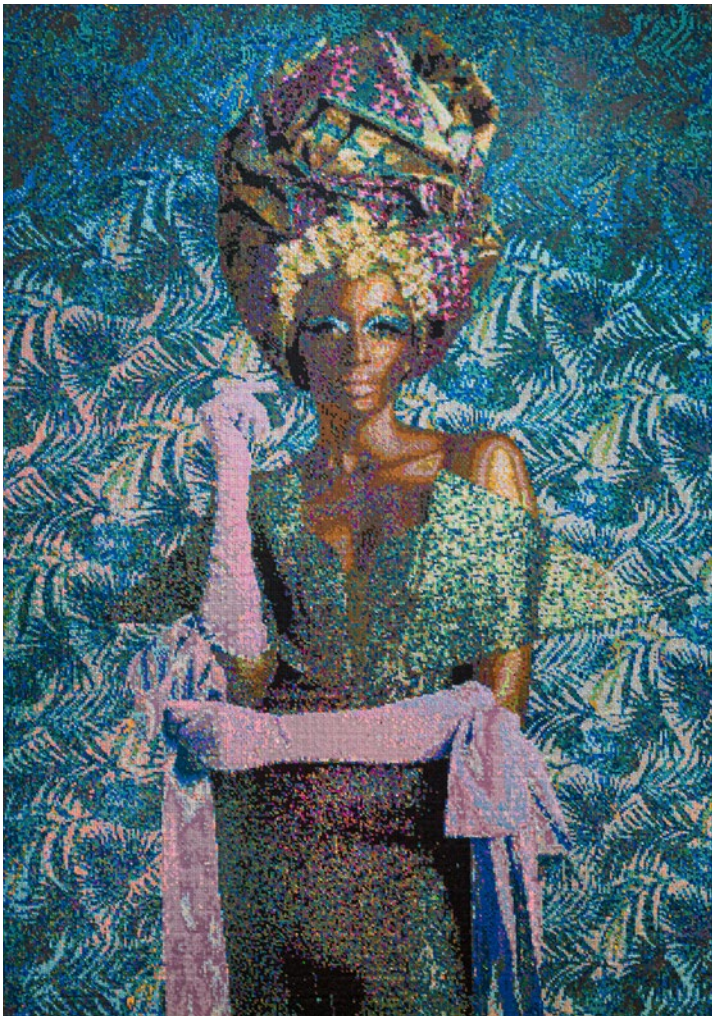
Combining humor and biting critique, Edgar Endress and Dietrich Wegner illustrate the beatification of consumer culture. Endress's collage, *Excuse Me for My Razzmatazz*, presents the figurative logo for the fast-food chain, Frisch's Big Boy, ascending upwards, encircled by green leaves. Explaining the inspiration for his work, Endress says, "The ultimate act of unity –Democracy- was relocated into the market, where the experience of consumption is the ultimate manifestation of choice and freedom. In modern American society, there is more activism and proactivity about what is and what is not on the shelves of the grocery store than on the direct democracy of the polis." Wegner's uncanny *Cumulous Brand* works are both seductive and unsettling, featuring images of babies tattooed with corporate logos "in a meditation on how our identities evolve and how we declare them." In a consumer-driven culture, we are what we eat, drink, and buy, from birth: the newest generation is branded in utero, growing into tattooed toddlers advertising aspiration.

Like the stylized figures in Christian iconography, "Pop stars—icons—in American culture are subjected to a constant mediatization, becoming objects of veneration themselves," says R. Luke DuBois. "*(Pop) Icon: Britney* is an art object that considers the shifting meaning of *icon* (in Greek—image), the original Greek word, which was used to signify an object of veneration, a staple of Eastern Orthodox and Catholic religious art…When embroiled in scandal (as Britney so often is), the cognitive dissonance of their audience is analogous to our experience of fallen angels." Set within an elaborate gold frame, *(Pop) Icon: Britney* is a multi-sensory evocation of Orthodox iconography. "Her image is stabilized and blurred, creating a constantly shifting halo or aura, around her face, reflecting back our gaze. Her voice is stripped from her songs (removing instrumental and techno-sounds for an 'a cappella' mix) and filtered through the reverberation of the San Vitale Basilica in Ravenna, Italy, one of the most important sites of Byzantine iconography in Western Europe." DuBois selected Britney as the ultimate *(Pop) Icon* because she is just that: pure image, simulacra.

Brian Paumier held and faced a gun when he made the *manda* ("vow") that inspired his multi-part *Act of Faith*, an altarpiece-like installation dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. "*Act of Faith* starts with a promise that was made in the heat of battle in Iraq," explains the artist, who was serving with U.S. forces. "I asked the Virgin of Guadalupe for her help and made a pledge: 'If you get me out of this, I will make you a *manda*.'" Celebrity portraits may be the most easily recognized imagery in circulation today, though their ubiquity reveals more about our cultural obsessions than about the identities of those we admire. Most viewers today will recognize Lady Gaga as the star of Robert Wilson's video portrait more readily than the figure pictured in *Mademoiselle Caroline Rivière*, who was the subject of J.A.D. Ingres's 19th-century portrait that hangs in the Louvre. While Lady Gaga accurately channels the impending mortality of the sitter (who died shortly after Ingres painted her), we will always see the contemporary pop star, whose image has been infinitely reproduced and disseminated by the expansive engine of 21st-century media, driven and fed by the public's desire. Aligning religious belief with the worship of beauty and fame that drives consumption, and enacting an obsessive practice, Graham Dolphin appropriates an advertisement for Dior perfume, onto which he meticulously inscribes the entire Biblical text of Exodus 1-25 as a shadowy, intricate outline on an image of Charlize Theron.

Frances Goodman
Queen, 2021
Hand-stitched sequins on canvas

Social media, influencers, and "likes" have expanded the definition of celebrity, providing a platform for individuals to secure wide-reaching recognition, digital or otherwise. To create her *Star Portraits* series, photographer Laurel Nakadate used Facebook to invite participants with whom she had varying degrees of connection. Although the artist requested that her subjects meet her alone, often at night, in a secluded area, she received hundreds of responses, reflecting the pervasive desire to be captured on camera, resulting in a fleeting moment of fame for the willing subject. Frances Goodman's *Queen*, from the series, *Transmogrified*, was made in 2021, and reflects the artist's experience of heightened isolation and increased engagement with social media: "Unable to work with other people in a live environment, I turned to the social media platforms available to me," Goodman recalls. "The extreme makeup/makeover trend – already popular even before the lockdown – rose to new heights during it because people were isolated at home with a lot of time on their hands. What appeared to start as a very niche and exclusive drag subculture moved into the mainstream."



Popular culture's obsession with the automobile has been dominant worldwide since the 20th century; both Luis Gispert and Caleb Kwarteng Prah explore today's diverse adaptations of car culture to reflect meditations on desire. Gispert's photographic series, *Decepción* ("disappointment"), the signature interlocking Gs of Gucci, Cs from Chanel, and other designer logos cover entire car interiors, creating a universe of second-degree luxury at once alluring and enigmatic. The dramatic, often majestic landscapes Gispert digitally integrates into these images were photographed in sites ranging from Lake Michigan, Death Valley, and Zermatt, Switzerland, to the Grand Tetons, California's Imperial Sand Dunes, and Utah's Great Salt Lake; the resulting works expose layers of longing, both material and metaphoric. Carefully negotiating what he calls "the politics of aesthetics," Gispert's vision marvels at the evolution of both the natural and the manufactured—though his artist's sensibility is alluded to here in *Chanel Jetty*; the horizon line includes Robert Smithson's 1970 earthwork in Rozel Point, Utah.

Inspired by the car-centric street life in Ghanaian cities, as well as images from his parents' wedding album, Prah prints photographs directly onto a variety of everyday, found materials, including the doors of tro tro (taxi-like vehicles), in his ongoing project, *Portrait of a City: 1 Minute Instant*. "Aesthetically, I draw inspiration from the socio-economic conditions of everyday Ghanaians, incorporating textures, colors, and patterns from objects such as tro tros, the most common mode of local transportation in Kumasi," explains the artist. The vibrant and colorful tro tro culture is rich with intriguing stories. Through my

Caleb Kwarteng Prah
Aware So, 2023
Car door, sticker on Aloco board

work, I aim to highlight the beauty of Ghanaian working-class life by creating engaging portraits integrated into compositions that blend everyday objects and paintings." The title, *Aware so* says Prah, "is a Twi phrase in Ghana meaning 'may your marriage prosper.' It's commonly used during wedding ceremonies to wish the new couple well on their journey ahead. Many Ghanaian Highlife music titles feature "Aware so" or something similar. The most common form of transport in Ghana, the tro tro car culture often includes proverbial inscriptions, with "Aware so" being one of the common."

Within the intersection of consumer and celebrity cultures, politicians and athletes too, are subject to mediatization; the exponential circulation of their images online and in print reduces Obama to magazine profiles accumulated into a portrait by Robert Silvers, and stills from on-camera appearances by Condoleezza Rice fix her identity as a powerful, larger-than-life woman, a status Mickalene Thomas emphasizes by presenting her images in diptychs alongside those of mega media mogul Oprah Winfrey. An archival press photo of Britain's late Queen Elizabeth II is incorporated into April Bey's mixed-media *Power Girl (Incarcerated Queen)*, combined with references to colonialism, commerce, and Afrofuturism. The image of the young monarch appears behind fabric bars, alluding both to Elizabeth's early, possibly reluctant, ascendance to the throne, and to the reproduction of her likeness on the currency and goods of Commonwealth nations, this portrait depicts more symbol than substance. Bey titles this series after Kendrick Lamar's *Black Panther* songs, which celebrate the resilience of Black women—true power girls, rather than a monarch who has inherited the exploitative legacy of colonialist practices without the power to assert individual agency, forever subject to her inherited, mediatized, celebrity status.

The media's dual process of veneration and distortion extends to the world of sports where, like actors and musicians, athletes are both glorified and objectified. Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou and Roberto Guerrero's portraits of male athletes present alternatives to the highly masculine, heteronormative realm of professional sports by subverting stereotypes and downplaying typical references to masculinity. Agbodjélou presents bodybuilders set against a colorful, patterned background holding vases of flowers; their pose recalling images from classical mythology of the three muses. Guerrero inserts gay identity where it had not been previously: here a coy, smiling, soccer player graces the cover of a sports magazine, a ball suggestively placed in the foreground. The pervasive use of drugs in the world of sports and beyond is the subject of works by Andy Diaz Hope and Felipe Barbosa. Barbosa's *Pill Ball* conflates addiction to both sports and drugs and critiques the fantasy of a "magic pill" that can fix either personal or public challenges. The sacred and the secular collide and intersect in Alexandre Mazza's *If It's Meant*

Hank Willis Thomas
Faith, 2017
Fiberglass, chameleon auto paint finish

to Be Love, May It Brand the Soul!. In this video, a sweating, bloodied boxer persists in challenging himself over a six-hour period, performing like a devout penitent seeking salvation or transcendence. A gleaming blue basketball balances on the fingertips of the disembodied arms and hands of Hank Willis Thomas's sculpture. Painted with iridescent "chameleon auto finish paint," the color of the work shifts and shimmers; its form and radiance illuminating the intersections of art, sports, religion, and politics.

The mystical and the mundane intertwine in the embellished costume sculptures by Nick Cave and Napoleon Aguilera. Cave's *Hustle Coat* is classic trench outerwear lined with row-upon-row of glistening jewels, watches and chains, referencing the coats worn by illegal street salesmen, who offer 'knock-offs' of luxury, brand-name goods for a fraction of the price. An outstretched, disembodied hand proffers the *Hustle Coat* to the viewer, imbuing its everyday treasures with mystery. "I'm totally consumed by the special attire that has a powerful and meaningful purpose within a culture," says Cave. Aguilera's hand-carved boot sculptures also mix materiality and metaphor, fashion and tradition, excess and inspiration. Based on the form of Mexican tribal boots, in which the toe box of cowboy boots is exaggerated into a long, narrow point, Aguilera's creations invoke the tale of Pinocchio, the myth of the Greek God Hermes, alongside the eponymous French fashion brand, as well as the more daring French style of Margiela, ornamented here with cigarettes and condoms.

Andy Warhol set a precedent for these combined references to depictions of society's least and most venerated in his series of screen test shots from 1962-64, *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, which began as a parody of the New York Police Department's "Thirteen Most Wanted" campaign. But while Warhol's Pop Art images privilege the physical beauty of their subjects, Titus Kaphar destabilizes the conventions of both traditional portraiture and the mug shot. Kaphar says that art history served as an important catalyst for his practice: "What seemed to be obvious oversights in the canon were regularly understated, suppressed or ignored," says the artist. Kaphar's

Destiny IV is a composite portrait of multiple incarcerated women sourced from online mugshots. These women—whose features blur and coalesce on the canvas—all share racial identifiers as well as the same name. In portraying them within a large-scale portrait whose features shift and multiply, Kaphar simultaneously alludes to the disproportionate incarceration of people of color and asserts the potential for his subjects to transcend current conditions, pursue new destinies, and be represented as in control of their own lives and identities.

The representation of Black American identity in advertising as well as in art is addressed in works by Sanford Biggers, Hank Willis Thomas, and Fahamu Pecou. The bright colors and blinking lights of Sanford Biggers's *Cheshire* suggest carnival signs, while the form—broad red lips surrounding white teeth—alludes to the racist images of African Americans used in early 20th-century advertising. Like Kaphar portraits, Fahamu Pecou's *Broken Open* resists the appropriation of Black American culture and denies the erasure of Black experience. Inspired by #BlackLivesMatter, a simple hashtag that symbolizes an ongoing movement, Pecou's painting attempts to reorient the angst and despair experienced by Black Americans by emphasizing beauty, strength, and resilience in this rock-star-like figure rendered in oil and gold leaf. As the artist writes, his work "confronts the performance of Black masculinity and Black identity, challenging and expanding the reading, performance, and expressions of Blackness," while reminding viewers that the most influential sources of contemporary pop culture have originated within Black culture.

The media's under- and misrepresentation of people of color is the subject of works by Derrick Adams, Deborah Roberts, and Van Hoang. Using the flat, saturated colors of Pop Art, Adams's *Floater* series mixes the imagery of advertising and portraiture to illustrate Black people at leisure—a topic rarely depicted in art history or commercial reproduction. Roberts explains that her collages of young Black girls are in part a response to the lack of advertisements and television shows featuring Black females: "To me, Black beauty has always been put on the back burner." She notes, "If you're eight, nine, and ten, and all of the images of beauty that you see on TV and ads are white faces, then where does your beauty lie? And how does that challenge you?" Roberts's polymorphic figures suggest a multiplicity of identities and potential, as does Van Hoang's monumental After *Angela*, inspired by the iconic civil rights activist, Angela Davis. The artist notes, "The work is not a portrait of the living breathing woman, Angela Davis. Rather, it is a look at just what the title suggests—a modern black female, today, after much of the defining work of Davis and her counterparts (of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement) has transpired. What are our expectations for this girl? Who constructed them? Are they attainable?"

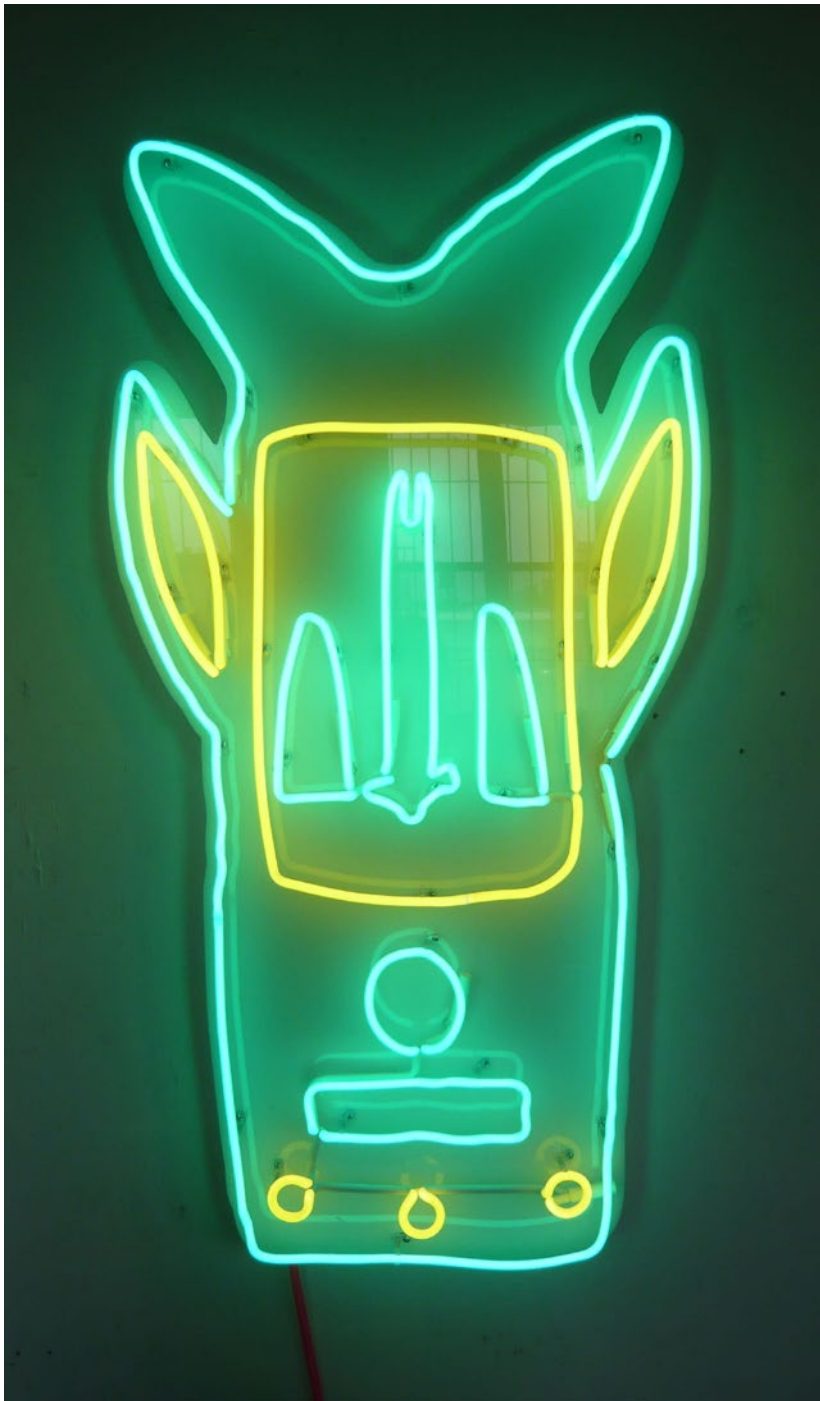
The longing for celebrity status affects institutions as well as individuals. Olivier Blanckart critiques the aspirational culture of the art world in his life-sized sculpture of Madonna, posed mid-performance, with one black boot on a trampoline, which bears an image of Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, one of the most famous works in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. This painting was considered radical when it was created in 1907: the five nude women are depicted as Cubist forms with faces resembling Iberian and African masks, and the title is the name of a Spanish brothel. Blanckart tweaks the title of Madonna's 1986 hit pop song, "Papa Don't Preach" to *MoMA Don't Preach*, in reference to that institution's role in shaping the canon—and effectively preaching a Euro-centric gospel. This contemporary work subverts the status of Picasso's masterpiece, and by implication, the authority of the institution to determine what constitutes fine art.

Glowing green and yellow with the neon of commercial signage, Brendan Fernandes's *1979.541.7* is entitled in the format of an institutional accession number, indicating that this work also addresses museum practices and power structures. One of a series, the artist explains that it "explores the dissemination of Western notions of an exotic Africa through the symbolic economy of 'African' masks sold on Canal Street, and on the streets outside museums in New York, such as the Whitney and the Metropolitan. The work plays on their contrasting relationship

to the masks on display in the museums themselves, examining the authenticity of these objects (the souvenirs on the street and the artefacts in museum collections) through pulsating neon masks. Their pulses silently spell out, in Morse code, questions about their own provenance, asking: 'who is the Master of Buli? Where is the Master of Buli? Is there a Master of the Buli?', in reference to an unknown artist who is listed on multiple works in the archives of the Met. How little is known about this figure, and the possibility that the figure himself may be an invention of the museum system, highlights issues in provenance and inequities in the practices of Western collections." A related series of NFT works (non-fungible tokens) entitled *Souvenir,* extends investigation of authenticity and appropriation into the newest digital arena in which art is being created and consumed, and offering a reminder that the origins of today's popular culture often lie in what was obscured yesterday.

– **Alice Gray Stites**, Chief Curator, Museum Director

Brendan Fernandes
1979.541.7, 2013
Neon on Plexiglas backing, with pink cord



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Cover:
Fahamu Pecou
Broken Open, 2016 (detail)
Acrylic, enamel, spray paint and
gold leaf on canvas