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Blindspots

Darryl Terrell, Derrick Woods-Morrow, TeeJay Hayche, Mariel Zinman, Shellie Zhang

Curated by: Dainesha Nugent-Palache

June 24th – August 6th, 2016

E. Patrick Johnson is a performance artist, ethnographer, and scholar, who explains that “because much of queer critical theory interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by [queer people] of colour who come from [racialized] communities.¹” The label of LGBTQ is often synonymous with gay-white-cis-able-bodied-male; *Blindspots* puts the focus on those who exist under the queer umbrella, but don’t quite fit under this category. This exhibition seeks to expand upon existing queer discourses through intersectionality, taking into account the experiences of five queer diasporic artists. The works of TeeJay Hayche, Darryl Terrell, Derrick Woods-Morrow, Shellie Zhang, and Mariel Zinman, come together to illustrate how queerness manifests itself once intersected by race, gender, class and nationality.

Although the umbrella of ‘queerness’ may create solidarity amongst those in the LGBTQ community, it may also homogenize their experience, thus running the risk of erasing difference. Differences in experience, actualized by way of race and nationality are important; race cannot be denied (when it is visible), and the impact of traditions and societal expectations passed down through one’s cultural history or nationality are hard to erase (even when they are denied). Scholars often discredit the validity of empirical knowledge--knowledge based on observation--viewing it as essentialist or devoid of

¹ Johnson, E. Patrick, and Mae Henderson. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham, NC:

intellectual merit²; however, the presence of empirical evidence is significant when dealing with the identity politics of those who fall outside of dominant systems and prevailing cultures. The personal narratives of racialized queers, though they might be individualized, will always speak to certain truths of others who fall within the same intersections, and are affected by the similar histories--while also revealing the shortcomings of the prevalent culture, and understanding of queerness.

bell hooks writes of Homeplace, the geographical place where we are raised and socialized. When one's Homeplace exists as a safe space to critique and discuss oppressive powers, it then becomes a site of resistance. In a similar manner, when one's intersectional queer position is taken into account, and the oppressive forces which police these bodies are challenged, it becomes an act of resistance³. *Blindspots* exists as a site of resistance against white supremacy in the LGBTQ community and in regards to queer discourse.

Given the current state of the world, the need to radicalize queerness and continue to fight for the equality of LGBTQ people is absolutely momentous when it comes to the welfare of queer people worldwide. Hate crimes committed against the LGBTQ community continue to be a tremendous problem, despite the perceived milestones which have occurred in terms of people's attitudes around queerness and the civil liberties granted to queer-identifying people in North America. In 2015, Statistics Canada released a report on police-reported hate crimes which indicates that hate crimes committed due to a person's sexuality or gender expression accounted for 16% of reported cases in 2013, however 66% of these crimes were violent in nature. It is also important to note that since 44% of police-reported hate crimes were committed due to a person's race⁴; when a racialized person is also queer, the likelihood of them being assaulted increases.

On June 12th 2016, what has been deemed the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history occurred in Orlando, Florida at Pulse, a queer nightclub. In terms of the existing societal attitudes surrounding queerness, there is gravity in the fact that the most horrific mass

² Hall, Donald E. *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2013. Print.

³ Hooks, Bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End, 1990. Print

⁴ Canada. Statistics Canada. *Government of Canada, Statistics Canada*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 June 2016.

shooting in U.S. history was a direct assault on the LGBTQ community. June 12th happened to be Latin night at Pulse, which unfortunately supports the statistics stated above that show that the potential of violent assault based upon sexual orientation and gender expression is increased when a person is also a visible minority. I cannot help but think that what happened in Orlando could have occurred at Yes Yes Y'all, a monthly queer dance party in Toronto, which celebrates queer POCs⁵. Although progress has been made for both POCs and queer identified individuals, discrimination is still prevalent, and the affects of history still mark their experience--history has the power to shape the future, for better or worse.

Derrick Woods-Morrow's series of photographs, *A Tale of Three Women (2015)*, demonstrates how history shapes the contemporary experience. Woods-Morrow's images are saturated in pastiche, as the artist embodies three women situated within different places in history, while at the same time speaking to his current experience as a queer black man. In the series, images of Saartjie Baartman, Grace Jones, and Kim Kardashian are reimagined through the use of the artist's own body. Colonial histories have rendered the black female body as hypersexual, though simultaneously undesirable, and the bodies of black males as violently hypermasculine and oversexualized. In both cases, these readings have moved black bodies into the realm of taboo and fetishism, often disallowing black people from being seen as more than sex objects. These ideas are perpetuated in popular media, and particularly in pornographic representations. The idea of black queer love is not often illustrated, rather, sexualized black bodies are seen to represent otherness and the forbidden. In the artist's words, "black males are often seen as nothing more than twelve-inch dicks who rape and pillage."⁶ *A Tale of Three Women* attempts to flip this reading, while simultaneously illustrating how certain ideas that surround the black queer identity have been constructed and continue to be maintained.

Saartjie Baartman, Grace Jones, and Kim Kardashian have each been hypersexualized, exoticized and framed as objects of desire to be consumed, at varying levels of agency.

⁵ a term used primarily in the United States to describe any person who is not white. The term encompasses all non-white groups, emphasizing common experiences of racism. The term's use is reminiscent of "colored", which was previously used in the US as a term for African Americans only.

⁶ Woods-Morrow, Derrick. Personal communication, June 2, 2016.

Saartjie Baartman was removed from South Africa by white European colonizers in the early 19th century, and exhibited across Europe as a freak show attraction, due to the large size of her bottom⁷. Grace Jones is a model and musician who was often photographed by her partner, Jean-Paul Goude, during the 1980s. However, Goude primarily photographed Jones nude, always accentuating her features (for example, her dark skin tone, androgynous features, and prominent bottom) which rendered her as different. Then there is Kim Kardashian, who is famous for not much other than her curves and love of selfies. In 2015, Jean-Paul Goude photographed Kim Kardashian for Paper Magazine in the same style as he had with many of his black female subjects in the past. Although Kim Kardashian can pass for Caucasian, Goude deliberately highlights her posterior as abnormal nudging her into the realm of otherness, inviting the viewer to further fetishize her. These are just a few examples pulled from a long history of black bodies being viewed as sexual objects for the consumption of the white gaze, perpetuating the wide-reaching legacy of colonialism. *A Tale of Three Women* allows the artist to stand in solidarity with these women who have had their identities shaped for them, quite literally presenting how an image or an understanding of a person's identity is constructed through photography and popular media. By reinstating his own agency and presenting himself as he would like to be read, Woods-Morrow rejects a projected macho and aggressive masculinity, allowing him to be read as feminine. Whereas Woods-Morrow's work explores expectations and fetishism imposed upon the black queer male body, the work of Darryl Terrell illustrates the dissonance that inherently marks the black queer male experience.

Rejecting or deviating from predetermined societal expectations around queerness-- and more specifically the queer black male body—increases the potential for stigmatization. As Terrell explains; the conversation around body image is one that is mainly fixated upon women, and “not until recently were women of color added to the conversation. There is another demographic that is still left out of the conversation, that being men. Queer, fem, black men, and I felt the need to speak on behalf of that demographic.”⁸ As do many racialized artists, Darryl Terrell finds that his work is a platform for exploring issues he faces

⁷ Crais, Clifton C., and Pamela Scully. *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. Print

⁸ Terrell, Darryl. Artist Statment, 2016.

in his everyday life. *I Wish I was Perfectly Happy* (2015), came into existence quite intuitively, during a transitional time; Terrell was leaving undergrad, coming to fully grasp his sexuality, and realizing that everyone around him seemed much happier than himself: “Everyone around me was in a committed relationship, finding jobs or beginning their Masters [degrees], and I found myself asking what’s wrong with me?”⁹ *I Wish I was Perfectly Happy* is a triptych composed of three self-portraits, seeking an answer to the question, “what’s wrong with me?” Terrell’s images make the viewer aware of subjective norms monitoring his physical appearance, while calling to attention less visible aspects, regarding history, culture, environment and personal traumas. The self-portraits employ a clinical study aesthetic; each presents a different angle of Terrell’s body, and is marked with labels pointing to different areas. Labels such as, “cute enough to be fucked, not to be loved” speak to the experiences of many black queer men during sexual or intimate encounters. Labels like “negroid type” and “Baartman” point to bodily features indicative of blackness, serving as a reminder of the histories which have deemed these features unattractive by societal standards. Homophobic slurs which have been directed at Terrell and violent events that he has had to endure because of his queerness are also noted onto his body. The artist makes mention of his body as a battlefield, where “some marks are made, some marks are deeper.”¹⁰ The work serves to illuminate the events and histories that make up a person’s experience which are not always visible, but have infinite relevance when discussing identity.

Mariel Zinman’s work continues this exploration of diasporic queer realities by illustrating how lived experiences leave invisible marks upon our bodies and shape our identities. The artist explains, “when people see me, they don’t see the songs, words, and teachings that have made me who I am today, that have been woven into who I am, how I see myself.”¹¹ In the performative video-work *Kedusha* (2016), Zinman attempts to reconcile the shame she feels around her sexuality, and the silence she has used in order to cope with these feelings. Zinman was raised in the Jewish Orthodox faith, and the piece explores the religious teachings that have contributed to those feelings. In the video, Zinman inscribes the sacred Hebrew word “Kedushah” קְדוּשָׁה (meaning feminine holiness), onto her body. Through this

⁹ Terrell, Darryl. Personal Communication, June 2, 2016.

¹⁰ Terrell, Darryl. Quote from *I Wish I Were Perfectly Happy*, 2015.

¹¹ Zinman, Mariel. Artist Statment 2016.

action she questions what it means to embody holiness and purity, while existing between two worlds: one of “modesty and traditional restrictions, and the other of open expression.”¹² Zinman’s experience is an embodiment of the cognitive dissonance that exists where culture and tradition intersect queerness, a common struggle for many diasporic queer people that often furthers feelings of displacement.

Artist Shellie Zhang also employs the use of traditional text to illustrate the potential for queer displacement when meaning is lost in translation. Shellie’s work consists of two elements, *我们* (2014), and *Neapolitan Dreams* (2015). *Neapolitan Dreams* is a series of 5 panel paintings, each containing an egg in the center; the work utilizes the colour swatches Zhang used for skin tones in her earlier paintings. In short, the paintings together act as a symbol for the unity of all women. The second element in Zhang’s installation is a wall drawing which includes a grid, into which the artist has repeatedly written the Mandarin characters for ‘us’ (*我们*), Zhang explains that this text comes from a fictional love letter a woman in Canada sends to a woman in China, where she writes the Mandarin characters for ‘us’ --*我们*--again and again. “Lost in translation, the phonetic pronunciation of *我们* reads as wǒ-men, when spoken in Mandarin. The emphasis on a homosexual relationship fails to be communicated although the message of unity is conveyed¹³”, says the artist. This “lost in translation” can be likened to Chinese government’s censorship of queer media throughout the country. Depictions of homosexuality exists amongst the long list of imagery but was deemed inappropriate following Xi Jinping coming into power in November of 2012¹⁴. Although queerness is not outrightly condemned in China, the government puts a great deal of effort into erasing it. In early 2016 a popular Chinese drama called *Addicted Heroin* was removed from the air, and made inaccessible online because of its queer content.¹⁵

Unfortunately, South Korea is one of many places throughout the world where a person can be punished for their queerness, running the risk of facing time in either prison or a mental

¹² Zinman, Mariel, Artist Statment, 2016.

¹³ Zhang, Shellie. Artist Statment, 2016.

¹⁴ Lu, Shen, and Katie Hunt. "China Bans Same-sex Romance from TV Screens." *CNN. Cable News Network*, 3 Mar. 2016. Web. 24 June 2016.

¹⁵ Lu, Shen, and Katie Hunt. "China Bans Same-sex Romance from TV Screens." *CNN. Cable News Network*, 3 Mar. 2016. Web. 24 June 2016.

institution. These violent oppressive measures inform Teejay Hache's practice. In South Korea, military service is expected of males between 18 and 35 years old who hold citizenship. Hayche must abide by this law, and because of the strict regulations around homosexuality in the army, he must be extra careful about exposing his identity as a queer person. Article 92 of the Military Penal Code defines same sex relations as harassment, disregarding the potential of consensual same sex relations¹⁶. In *Angry Hotel* (2014), two young Koreans dressed in army attire drink Soju (a popular Korean alcoholic beverage), while speaking aggressively to the camera. The pair spews homophobic slurs as well as racial epithets directed at Anglo-Saxon westerners, with the intent of redirecting their anger derived from systematic oppression. The Asian male body has been erased and effeminized, partly by way of early colonial writings on the "orient" and sexuality¹⁷. These texts center European men as the masculine standard and characterize Asian males as androgynous and feminine; contemporary Western culture perpetuates this argument, and the lack of visible Asian males in popular media contributes to their erasure. The University of Southern California conducted a survey of the 600 most popular films between 2007 and 2013, and their findings concluded that only 4.4% of the characters with speaking roles were Asian¹⁸--this figure accounts for both men and women, so the figure for men alone is presumably much smaller.

The subjects in *Angry Hotel* reject a passive reading of Asian maleness and femininity, through assertiveness and aggressivity. Each segment featuring the interlocutors is interrupted with highly stylized dance animations (featuring dancers Hayche refers to as the "gay army¹⁹"), and scenes reappropriated from Korean pop videos, illustrating the existing homoerotic undertones in mainstream South Korean culture. One of the protagonists in *Angry Hotel* questions the necessity of studying the works of Western theorists as there are

¹⁶ Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Working Group. "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and the Refugee Determination Process in Canada." *Academia.edu*. <http://ihrp.law.utoronto.ca/>, Jan. 2015. Web. 16 June 2016.

¹⁷ Han, C. Winter. "Constructing the Asian Male Body." *Body Aesthetics*. Ed. Sherri Irvin. Corby: Oxford UP, 2016. N. pag. Print.

¹⁸ Smith, Stacy L., Dr., and Katherine Pieper, Dr. "Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films: Examining On Screen Portrayals and Behind the Camera Diversity." *Annenberg.usc.edu*. University of Southern California, 2013. Web. 23 June 2016.

¹⁹ Hayche, TeeJay. Personal Communication, June 16th, 2016.

many South Korean scholars whose writing speaks more clearly to his own personal experience and understanding of queerness. Though Western queer studies occupy a preeminent position in the academia, these ideas do not encompass the multiplicity of existing queer voices.

The stories of all people matter, but when the perception of prevailing groups is accepted as universal truth, voices are silenced, difference is erased, and people become oppressed. In the same way, when empirical evidence presented by minorities is deemed invalid, this is the same as denying the legitimacy of their experiences, it is the same thing as asking them to either remain hidden and out of sight--to remain in your blind spot.