



## External Space



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Blackpowerbarbie (aka Amika Cooper)

### **Edges**

September 5 – October 9, 2018

*The font courier has been specifically chosen as it is reminiscent of surveillance papers written about members of black empowerment movements.*

**Interview with Lue Boileau, August 20th, 2018.**

### **"Edges"**

A group of people stand and observe an object. They agree together that it is art. The minimalist halls and rectangular pedestals, the sterile paint, glass displays and entrance fees; the legitimacy of white art precurses the value of the work.

The sensationalization of the most banal items, for example a singular urinal<sup>1</sup>, are elevated to a place of praise. Not because we genuinely believe it is witty, sensitive, or

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<sup>1</sup>Fontain, by Marcel Duchamp produced in 1917 is a porcelain urinal, regarded as a major landmark in art history.

philosophical to ask the question, "can a pipe be considered artwork?" but because they are the product of white imaginations, whose mediocrity we are in agreement to neither mock nor disclose to each other. blackpowerbarbie stands in that space and refuses to participate: "You are not special and your art is not genius," she says.

blackpowerbarbie is an illustrator, animator and digital artist. She describes her work as exploring the beauty and complexity, sensitivity and vulnerability of Black femmes.<sup>2</sup> *Edges* is a response to the tradition of modern art, focusing on the mundane, the everyday. She criticizes the gatekeeping and selffulfilment of "high art." The following is a scene-by-scene account of her illustrated work "Edges," based on a conversation between writer and artist.

### **"Figure 1. Black Genius"**

*Edges* opens with a how-to tutorial, revolving a single tool on display. 'Figure 1,' Toothbrush. We are given three views of 'toothbrush' as it rotates around, spiralling into a 1950s-style ad for hair gel. The artist poses the question: Can a singular item, significant for Black use, be considered artwork?

She takes our most common place objects and places them on the pedestal. We stand back and look at them. What happens next is what is most interesting. We find they are in fact an entry point into a tradition of artistic genius that has been considered unnoteworthy. But that in itself, is one of the most

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<sup>2</sup> blackpowerbarbie, Amika Cooper in discussion with the author on August 20th, 2018. All citations were taken from a transcribed discussion with the artist. All excerpts were revised and approved by the artist.

exquisite arenas of artwork, found in the intimacy of Black self adornment. Black hair is art.

She milks the artbros' tears, dips her brush in them to lay her edges and we never hear from him again. "Dip, dip, dip, dab, dab, dab." <sup>3</sup>

### **"Grain and Glow: 1970's Glam"**

blackpowerbarbie shows us a "Diana Ross in a minimalist space." <sup>4</sup> The womxn depicted is reminiscent of an era defined by *Jet Magazine*, Afro-Sheen, Marsha 'Pay It No Mind' Johnson, Donna Summer, Pam Grier, Bethann Hardison <sup>5</sup>: 1970s Blackness, beauty and self-defined glamour. Dazzling, gender-nonconforming, soft, queer, iconic, unbothered, dangerous, glamorous Black femmes.

Her eyelids are painted purple, her hair takes up the entire frame. <sup>6</sup> She is a trans femme. Her opulence is unquestionable. White hands reach out from behind a curtain and seek to service her. They are just hands and arms, with no body visible. Like a toothbrush, or a makeup mirror, they are a utility in the essential work of being a Black femme.

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<sup>3</sup> Edges, blackpowerbarbie, 00:26

<sup>4</sup> blackpowerbarbie, Amika Cooper in discussion with the author on August 20th, 2018. All citations were taken from a transcribed discussion with the artist. All excerpts were revised and approved by the artist.

<sup>5</sup>Jet Magazine: an influential black press, founded in 1951 in Chicago, Illinois; Afro-Sheen: a black hair company known for embracing black hair and beauty popular throughout the 1970s; Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson: legendary trans activist who catalyzed the StoneWall Riots of 1969 in NYC and worked to create shelters for homeless LGBTQ youth; Donna Summer: singer, songwriter and actress prominent during 1970s disco era; Pam Grier: actress well known for her roles in blaxploitation films such as *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*; Beth Ann Hardison: Black model and fashion activist.

<sup>6</sup> Edges, blackpowerbarbie Amika Cooper, 00:34

It is a subversion of a relationship - white hands in a black woman's hair, whiteness relating to Black trans womanhood. But here they are a means to an end, no more significant than if the toothbrush stood alone, and made only fabulous in their service of the beautiful presence that dominates the room.

### **"Tek Care, Tek Time"**

Those tools that are so mundane and every day are also found making glamour in the beautification that happens alone, in the rituals that are intimate, and self-preserving. blackpowerbarbie next shows us a femme in front of a mirror, knees tucked, in a glittery silver thong. In the quiet of their own presence, they work meticulously laying edges, drawing out and bestowing beauty, with the kind of consideration that is rarely granted to the bodies of Black femmes. There is restfulness and renewal in the hands that make ready a body to be celebrated, to be loved and accepted.

blackpowerbarbie illuminates that these rituals of self-care are necessitated by the urgent fatigue of oppression.<sup>7</sup> The cumulative tiredness that stories along the heritage of each Black femme. This self-care is done with elegance and artistry. The fatigue is not what is in focus in *Edges*, but it is what makes the rituals of self care, beautification and decoration an essential heritage in Black diasporas.

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<sup>7</sup> blackpowerbarbie, Amika Cooper in discussion with the author on August 20th, 2018. All citations were taken from a transcribed discussion with the artist. All excerpts were revised and approved by the artist.

## **"Art takes a village"**

The artist shows us a circle of black and brown hands engaged in this work. They multiply, layered over and over each other until they are indistinguishable, linked in a continuous community.<sup>8</sup>

In every gendered experience, "at the core of beauty rituals is community."<sup>9</sup> The artist describes Black traditions of beauty and grooming as very artistic, and always with the community at the centre.

And it is to this community that blackpowerbarbie addresses her final love note, layed exquisitely on the forehead of a fore-bearer:

"For those who exist  
on the margins  
Making art  
out of edges"<sup>10</sup>

"Creating on the edges  
Making space on the margin  
Solidarity in the struggle"<sup>11</sup>

To the Black femme, she shows us that our work, our imagination and our realities are genius.

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<sup>8</sup> Edges, blackpowerbarbie, 01:08

<sup>9</sup> blackpowerbarbie Amika Cooper in discussion with the author on August 20th, 2018. All citations were taken from a transcribed discussion with the artist. All excerpts were revised and approved by the artist.

<sup>10</sup> Edges, blackpowerbarbie, 01:15 to 01:22

<sup>11</sup> Edges, blackpowerbarbie, 01:26 to 01:31

Thank you blackpowerbarbie.

All the best,

lue boileau