



Project Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Aaron Jones

Exercise Nerve (Men I Face or Many Faces)

February 28th – March 28th, 2020

A figure stands between tall hedges, their shadows engulfing him on all sides. He approaches an opening and starts his Sisyphian task. He comes to the maze every day, but has yet to reach its centre, where he hopes to find the answers he seeks. Some days he follows the path dutifully, hitting dead ends and starting anew. On other days, his frustration overcomes him and he hacks through the bush, deconstructing and recreating his own path to understanding. The maze always rebuilds itself.

This is his ritual, a daily practice of searching for that which evades him.

Aaron Jones is a Jamaican-Canadian artist who uses collage to work through ideas of self-reflection, identity, masculinity and melanin. Through a ritualistic practice of deconstructing found images—from an ever-growing personal archive—he creates characters that subvert and challenge archetypes. In the title *Exercise Nerve*, exercise refers to the development of a practice, in this case one of bold, forthright behaviour. The process of searching for images and the subsequent gluing, mark-making and ripping apart is integral to Jones' conception of his characters, that are often self-portraits. He scours the pages of

encyclopedias, back issues of magazines and non-fiction books for images he can relate to and builds the characters piece by piece, changing their context and imbuing them with new meaning. “First and foremost, everything comes from a place of finding myself in print media¹”.

In this show, Jones’ collection of collages are scattered across the walls of the space, which are painted black. A cube sculpture is set on the ground in the middle of the room, with four identical amorphous faces on each side (an X-ray that he found in an old *Life* magazine). The root of Jones’ inspiration for the cube is a belief held by a small sect of the Nation of Islam, that 6,000 years ago an immortal being was created. Jones refers to the being as an actor, with the ability to change his face from that of a human to a monster to a robot and many other faces. He uses that ability to present himself as less ominous to us, humans. Jones has rendered a version of this being as the cube and all four white faces are watching the collage characters on the walls. To put it plainly, he said “the ‘man I face’ is the cube and the ‘many faces’ are the collages I make,²” in reference to the secondary title of the show. He’s also referencing the character Man-E-Faces, from the cartoon series He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, who could change his face at will.

Can we talk about a Black artist without discussing their inherent Blackness? Since Jones’ work often explores his own identity and masculinity, it’s often discussed in terms of “Blackness.”

“I am at a place where I just don't want to say Black anymore [in reference to my work]. It's quite redundant and very evident. Human beings are visual creatures. But, I am Black. And I can't escape it, especially in this context. But, at the same time, I just want to focus on being a person with emotions and feelings related to regular stuff. And many things come before the colour of your skin in reference to white people.³”

¹ Aaron Jones, in discussion with author Kelsey Adams, February 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Within the corridors of the dark, twisted maze the figure is looking for himself.

The maze has its own agenda. It wants him confused, angry, lost. It wants his sense of identity in ruin. That's how the maze wins.

But the figure has a few tricks, he can play the game. He knows when the maze is watching and exactly what it expects to see. And while he's performing a spectacle of appeasement, he's scheming ways to get to the centre. He pats his back pocket discreetly, ensuring his secret weapon is still safe.

In a corner, a ceramic figure of a Black samurai rests on a plinth. He's dressed in regal attire, in a fighting stance, with piercing eyes as if staring at his next opponent. On the walls, the defiant gaze and widespread wings of the figure in *Self Portrait (2017)*, the layers of identity in *Self Portrait (2018)* or the coy smile of a face carved out by mark-making in *Seeing Space (2018)* point to a multiplicity of experiences, meanings and storylines. The space is covered in interwoven narratives, all of the collage creations in conversation with each other. Although Jones doesn't consider his characters to be people, they are made up of elements of people and speak to the anxieties and joys of being human.

A relationship emerges as the omnipresent cube-being surveils these figures made up of elements of Black people. In my reading of the work, the cube is representative of the ways whiteness can insidiously permeate and manifest itself differently to benefit white supremacy. Considering the immortal being's many faces, we have the stoic and apathetic robot that turns a blind eye, the relatable and agreeable human who feigns friendship and the colonial, capitalistic monster that devours. All one in the same. All watching the spectacle on display.

There is a figure of a man in *Election Ship (2018/2019)* with his arms jubilantly outstretched, as if celebrating some kind of victory. As Jones "looks for himself" amongst

the pages of magazines and books he's adamant that he's looking for more than Blackness. "It's a disservice to say I'm just looking for Black people. I'm actually looking for things that I can relate to. It's been a harder search to find actual images of men that don't look like they just want to play sports or to find a variety of emotions and stuff. It's just been a search for normal ass men.⁴"

Exercise Nerve is a tribute to the visible presence of Jones' practice in his artwork—it is in the ritual of doing and undoing and doing again that he reaches a consensus. The meanings and narratives ascribed to the figures are malleable, dependent on the current configuration of paper on paper. Permanence is not the end goal, mutability is.

Potassium chlorate drags across red phosphorus. A spark and then a flame. The figure drops a match into the bush and lights another and another and another. Soon, the whole maze is up in flames. He watches as its towering hedges fall, revealing the route to the centre. He starts on a new path of his own making.

Sometimes, the only way through is to burn it all down and start again.

-Kelsey Adams

⁴ Ibid.