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**Shantel Miller, *The Side Profile Series***  
**October 28 – December 3, 2016**

Shantel Miller's *The Side Profile Series* deconstructs the performativity of black bodies in socio-political settings. The series of eight oil paintings explores the implications of racial profiling and the politics of looking and being looked at. Inspired by mug-shot portraiture, the works also spotlight black male vulnerability, systematic power imbalances and misconceptions of blackness. The work features men from Miller's life painted in profile, with their shadows. The shadow not only references the likeness of the subject but also represents society's faceless caricatures of blackness. By capturing both the figures and their precarious positionality, Miller's paintings inevitably become two-way mirrors. So, if all portraits are two-way mirrors, then is a portrait of a black man simply a reflection of the systems, which abuse him? Is this room filled with black men merely a mirrored reflection of the thoughts and opinions of those who enter it? Is it true that "*at the end of every path we take we find a body that is always already colonized,*" and can our subjectivities ever be of our own making? <sup>1</sup>

Among the discussions I assumed would arise while working with Shantel Miller I hadn't expected that choosing a title for her exhibition would be the most provocative. As a practicing artist of colour myself, it has always been my concern that my work would never be read correctly by those who couldn't understand my

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<sup>1</sup> O'Grady, Lorraine, "Olympia's Maid," *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*. New York, NY: Icon Editions, 154-70. 1994. Print.

experiences. I've always feared that my work would be lumped into a category of tokenism and otherness. Miller's series focuses heavily on perception, reading and looking, so choosing a title that could eloquently describe black vulnerability without referencing something outside of itself was crucial. It was during this process of naming that I remembered a particular quotation by James Baldwin: "*As a Negro, you represent a level of experience [people] deny.*" We quickly realized that using a colonized language to construct a title that embodied these denied experiences would be far more difficult than we imagined.

### ***Yellow Room***

This title is subtle enough, right? It focuses more on the room itself rather than what exists within it. The cadmium walls are comforting, inviting and say nothing about blackness that could seem 'too political' or 'race related.' This title is a trap—although it invites, excites and sets the viewer up for joy and laughter, it isn't completely disengaged from the work and its concepts. The yellow humanizes the men of Miller's paintings and removes them from a state of objecthood. By complimenting the redness in their skin, the yellow emphasizes that these subjects are alive and are not merely paintings on a wall. *The Yellow Room* invites subjects into a space where they are prompted to think critically about race and oppression. But it's a trap.

### ***Say My Name/ Portraits of Us***

Olivier, Teekay, Khanya. The names we give ourselves speak to our individuality; while the names we are given by society say more about the social uniforms we are cloaked in. The subjectivities of bodies of colour are so often categorized in a singular sameness. Miller contends this very misconception throughout her series. During our first meeting, Miller clarified that it was not at all her intention to piggyback on Black Lives Matter. However, I reminded her that the work would inevitably be perceived as doing so. It wasn't Miller's brother, Sebastien's, intention to wear a grey hoodie as tribute to Trayvon Martin, but rather as a

declaration of his own identity. *Desi, Corey, Sebastein*: the first names of Miller's subjects also act as the titles of each portrait. By saying these names, the speaker recognizes each man as an individual. Then why are their experiences lumped into a single taxonomy? *Say My Name* was not an adequate title because it can be so quickly linked to BLM, and *Portraits of Us* to the entirety of black people. But the oppression of black males exists outside of police brutality and experiences of injustice vary from person to person. Blackness does not exist in singularity, nor does it only appear when riots begin. These portraits are not solely inspired by recent events, but rather by everyday experiences.

### ***Periphery***

***Periphery*** - a marginal or secondary position in, or part or aspect of, a group, subject, or sphere of activity.

***Periphery*** - noun: the outer limits or edge of an area or object

***Peripheral Vision***: side vision; what is seen on the side by the eye when looking straight ahead.

Our final attempt was *Periphery*. Not only did this title recognize marginalization but it is also brought peripheral vision to mind. *Periphery: the outer edge, the tip of the iceberg, the place between the 'now' and the 'what's next?'* Seated in profile view, each man refuses to meet the gaze of his spectator. However, their diverted eyes do not render them powerless but rather powerful, as the act is a method of reclaiming one's subjectivity. Mug-shot portraiture behaves as a vehicle for looking, yet Miller successfully disrupts the viewer from seeing the entirety of the subject's face and by doing so she returns the power to the subject. *Periphery* prompts the spectator to consider the difference between being *gazed upon* and being *looked at* and those who are so often seen from a side view. The openness Miller acquires through painting allows her to refute the ontology of the mug-shot by idealizing and tracing over her subject's intimately.

The title 'The Side Profile Series' championed over all as alternative titles seemed to constrain Miller's efforts to re-contextualize the black body, while this title simply described the way in which each subject was painted. As Miller's intentions were multi-faceted it was important that they were left open for interpretation. By initiating a conversation about individuality and vulnerability, she reveals the civility of human bodies regardless of skin colour. Yet, each painting exposes the masses to black male's oppression and reveals Miller's concerns as a sister to black men. This sensitivity and kinship notes that behind every black man there is someone who *looks* and someone who *gazes*.

**-leaf jerlefa**