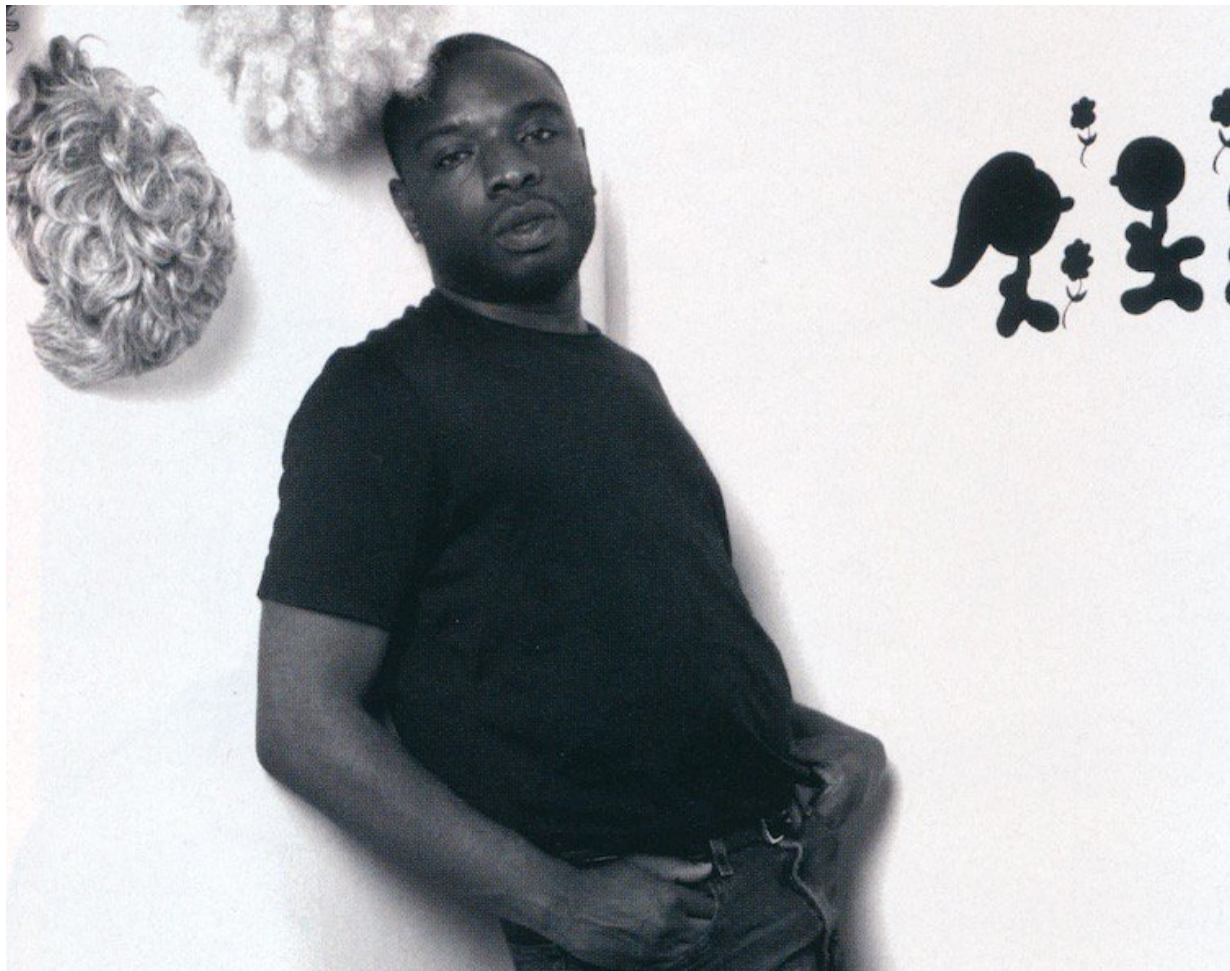


OUT

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FROM THE  VAULTS

From the Vaults: Kalup Linzy's Campy Soap Operas Explore Race & Sexuality



Photography: Peter Bellamy

With their lo-fi quality and raunchy content, his videos feel closer to YouTube than Art.

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Many of us love to watch soap operas, but how many artists can claim soaps as raw material for their work? Step forward Kalup Linzy, a 29-year-old video artist on the verge of major art stardom who freely admits that his staunchly gay and outrageously campy video art would barely exist without the high drama of soapland.

Linzy's tour de force is the compelling five-part *Conversations Wit de Charm*, which takes its name from the long-running soap *All My Children*. It follows a web of working-class characters as they confront love, betrayal, and sundry other dramas. With their lo-fi quality and raunchy content, his videos feel closer in spirit to YouTube than Art, with Linzy channeling Divine, Cindy Sherman, Wigstock, and local public access shows. Talk about addictive!

Just what is it about soap operas and old sitcoms that Linzy finds so compelling? "*Good Times* and *The Jeffersons* both dealt with issues that were uncomfortable but important to talk about," he says, counting off child abuse, poverty, racism, and interracial marriage among those tough subjects. If Linzy's themes are likewise serious, his method is not: In *CWDC II: All My Churen* (2003) he plays a family of three generations, with characters including Taiwan, a drag queen explaining to his mother, "I just want to be an entertainer," and Jo Jo, victim of a drive by shooting who turns out to be the pet dog of Taiwan's sister and not, as we are initially led to believe, her husband.

Linzy is currently finishing up the fifth installment of *Conversations Wit de Churen*. His characters—all played by Linzy—are often seen in slo-mo close-ups, plumbing the depths of their emotional upheavals as the screen fades to black. Most conversations take place over the phone and are spoken in thick Southern accents, with Linzy lip-synching to his own voice, sped up or slowed down to comic effect. A mishmash of new- and old-school R&B by Minnie Riperton and En Vogue as well as original ballads and karaoke tracks sung by Linzy form the soundtrack to his gripping dramas.

Pop culture is Linzy's muse. During a call on a photo shoot for this piece he dished with a friend about how they had missed Oprah Winfrey's *Legends Ball* TV special, in which America's den mother honored African American women past and present, including Maya Angelou, Aretha Franklin, Toni Morrison, Rosa Parks, Tina Turner, and Alice Walker. He almost could have been discussion one of his own videos: Kalup Linzy's *Legends Ball*, perhaps, in which Naomi Campbell, Kimora Lee Simmons, and Star Jones are thrown into the mix for a good laugh—and to paint a complicated picture of race, gender, and sexuality.