

## *FIVE.*

By Charlene K. Lau

Curated by painter Nina Chanel Abney in conversations with art dealer Joeonna Bellerado-Samuels, *FIVE.* gathers 11 artists—Nick Cave, Ilana Harris-Babou, Solange Knowles, Kalup Linzy, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Azikiwe Mohammed, Christie Neptune, Thenjiwe Nikki Nkosi, Sondra Perry, Elliot Reed, and Jacolby Satterwhite—into an online exhibition that shifts in and around feelings of anxiety, stillness, isolation, escapism, and fear during the COVID-19 lockdown. Focusing on the moving image, the show is an antidote to viewing room fatigue and ill-begotten exhibitions made virtual. More importantly, it presents the vicissitudes of contemporary Black life in a world rife with racial injustice, while responding to the disproportionate impact of the virus on historically racialized, marginalized, and underserved communities. Embodying a rousing act of sovereignty, *FIVE.* takes back images of Blackness, as mass protests spill over onto the streets and screens across the globe. To look at these works in this moment is to view them through centuries' long oppression and rage bottled by the pandemic and recently stoked by state-sanctioned police brutality and racially motivated murder.



Thenjiwe Nikki Nkosi, *Suspension* (feat. Nonku Phiri and Dion Monti) (Sierra Brooks, Daisha Cannon, Luci Collins, Olivia Courtney, Naveen Daries, Dominique Dawes, Nia Dennis, Makarri

*Doggette, Daiane dos Santos, Gabby Douglas, Dianne Durham, Yesenia Ferrera, Annia Hatch, Ashleigh Heldsinger, Laurie Hernandez, Kiya Johnson, Dipa Karmakar, Jennifer Khwela, Rankoe Mammule, Sibongile Mjekula, Betty Okino, Elizabeth Price, Caitlin Rooskrantz, Tasha Schwikert, Jamison Sears, Stella Umeh, Gabby Wilson, Corrine Wright*), 2020. Digital video, sound, duration: 6:45 min. Courtesy the artist.

Thenjiwe Nikki Nkosi's arresting video *Suspension* (2020) begins the exhibition with footage of Black and Brown female gymnasts cut from their moments just before, during, or after their routines. They wait and focus, their uncertain yet steely determination and resolve palpable. An ethereal soundtrack by South African vocalist Nonku Phiri and producer Dion Monti accompanies the video as it builds on the tension and anticipation generated by the undeniable nerves of these women. However, after 6 minutes and 45 seconds, the viewer is not granted the liberty of seeing any further performance. It's deeply entrancing and demands our attention, forcing us to witness the constant battle of anxiety and strength in these liminal junctures.

Scrolling further, Sondra Perry's GIF *Cat Frazier and Jesse Howard in rotation* (2016) is a darkly hilarious quip. It rotates back and forth in virtual space, its pessimism literally spelled out in zeroes and the word "NO" in text taken from work of the late folk artist Jesse Howard:

000,000  
NOTHING  
NO CONFIDENCE  
NO=NOTHING  
NO=0000

This point of negation can be found in another video of Perry's in the exhibition, *Studio Test (No, No, No)* (2014) in which the artist sports a mask-like contraption consisting of an iPad standing in for eyes and nose and iPhone for the mouth. The devices' pre-recorded videos show Perry chewing gum and sporting a perma-eyeroll, then lip synching Dawn Penn's 1994 reggae hit *You Don't Love Me (No, No, No)*. Hand on hip and swaying to the grooves, Perry's cyborg expression changes over the course of the song, moving to questioning concern, then wide-

eyed incredulity. It feels like a return of the gaze, a staunch rebuttal of refusal mixed with the blasé.



Ilana Harris-Babou, *Decision Fatigue*, 2020. HD video, duration: 8:33 min. Courtesy the artist.

In Ilana Harris-Babou's video *Decision Fatigue* (2020), the gaze hits the side of the face of Sheila Harris, the artist's mother. The work satirizes "daily beauty routine" videos on YouTube and places Black womanhood at the center of an otherwise overwhelmingly White lifestyle and wellness industry. Harris-Babou caricatures self-care in promoting what looks like anti-wellness by replacing perceived health rituals with junk food. I watch transfixed as Harris goes through the motions of her "clean beauty routine," using an ubiquitous rose quartz roller over her face in preparation for eating a TV dinner or crushing Cheetos to use as a face mask, all the while cautioning against breastfeeding as "your lifeforce...drained from you."



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Moments of Silence*, 2019. 2-channel HD color video, sound, duration: 5:23 min.

The 2-channel work *Moments of Silence* (2019) also involves a maternal collaboration of sorts, that of Jacolby Satterwhite and his late mother, Patricia. Taking its title from the first track of Satterwhite and musician Nick Weiss's album *Love Will Find A Way Home* (2019) under the moniker PAT, the video features vocals of the elder Satterwhite. "Moments of silence, chase your cares away" she croons on the celestial track, the club beats morphing to an animated futurescape inhabited by tiny dancers and 3D renderings of objects from Satterwhite's mother's drawings. While the imagined world moves between living room "shrines," newsstand, football field and club on the left, on the right, the artist dances in the shuttered Brooklyn queer club Spectrum, as if a memorial for person and place.



Kalup Linzy, *Hot Mess from Sweetberry Sonnet*, 2008. Video, duration: 3:59 min. Courtesy the artist.

In another world, Kalup Linzy's now retired alter ego Taiwan wrestles with desire and doubt in the steamy but zippy music video for "Hot Mess" a song from the album *SweetBerry Sonnet* (2008). A kaleidoscopic, strawberry-tinted confection, the video exposes Taiwan's anxious second guessing and self-critical inner voice

chastising himself for desiring sex over love, before coming to self-acceptance. It's in works such as these where complex and nuanced records of Black experience are transmuted through time, whether before, during, or beyond the pandemic. *FIVE.* processes this labyrinth using the screen of the internet, a site for much pain and grief, but ultimately, connection and persistence against erasure.