



NOEL ANDERSON
BLAK ORIGIN MOMENT

In a place where the present is precarious and the future is opaque (which in modern times, seems to be *all* the time), we inevitably turn to the relatively known quantity of the past for reasons and/or support. With multiple resources available today to trace one's heritage, the pursuit of origins has become a cottage industry and an implicit exercise of therapeutic self-help – affirming one's ancestry to better navigate the uncertainty ahead. As information and the pace of life accelerates in the present, and ethnicity remains an excuse for extermination the world over, the past is perceived as a fertile repository of precedents, lessons, caveats and roots...if only we can decode them.

Anthropogeny is the increasingly popular study of human origins, which, according to Professor Benjamin H. Bratton's 2017 essay *On Anthropolysis*, ambivalently considers "what enables and curtails us today." In an attempt to re-shape the latter into the former, the organizers of Black History Month in Australia have – "since the 26th Day of January, 2008, in commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the proclamation of Survival Day" – advanced a campaign to "EMBRACE THE BLAK." Arguing that the word "black" has historically been employed "to connote something negative and disempowering for the people who have been at the receiving end of race-based insults," the organizers implore their community to take back the "ownership of language" as a fundamental step towards self-determination. Looking back as one part of this linguistic repatriation – "proclaimed," in their words, "on the shoulders of giants and a cultural continuum from time immemorial" – they loudly and proudly, "use **Blak** as an expression of taking back power and control within a society..."

Artist Noel Anderson explores this desire for enlightenment in, and as beginnings in his *Blak Origin Moment*, interrogating the cultural aspiration for a singular essence. Employing the provocative ontological question "when did you know you were black?" as the initial prompt, he set out to produce a series of interviews, images and encounters that mine the genealogy of black consciousness. As much inquiry as sacrificial straw man, Anderson

questions the ensuing premise that, "there is a moment in the black experience where – whether it was from a family member, friend, racist experience or an external authority – black people can locate becoming conscious of their race." The architecture of said identity supposedly lives in the "archive" – which Anderson positions as a proverbial site of origins. Glibly restating what has calcified as a cultural norm, he observes how "we travel to a museum seeking archives to tell us about our history." For this exhibition, the archive is signified by vintage sound recordings, movie clips, appropriated images, "used" and found objects, magazine pages and other materials that simultaneously symbolize and skew the language of history. Focusing especially

on "moments where," for Anderson, "racial recognition is heightened," he explains that "the majority of the images for the show emerge from contemporary encounters with police." From the archival photo seen in *die Leitung* and the violent Hustler Magazine cartoon in *drehen* to the fused images of officers and victims in the *Escapism* series and the police barricade-turned-sculpture in *Zip*, Anderson escalates both the force and perversity of his artifacts as they morph into altered states of being. Much of the work is also encountered under low light, amidst heavy curtains of black rubber sheeting, with recorded voices and musical ghosts drifting

about. In purposeful shadow, Anderson evokes the hushed character of an ancient archive at the same time he erodes our ability to see, and to know.

The enduring appetite to locate an essence of blackness within the work of black artists is a claustrophobic course for curator Adrienne Edwards, who argues that traditional "black representation" conflates an artist's personal perspective with the totalizing dynamics of a discourse. As such, despite aspirations of "transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity" amongst its practitioners, this genre of "black art" (that has leaned towards figuration and realism) has the opposite effect for her – sacrificing diverse constellations to "a singular historical narrative or monolithic subjectivity." As a response to these reductive ends, Edwards argues for "blackness in abstraction" as "an attempt to under-



stand how artists negotiate and exhaust the paradigm of black representation in art." Exercised in the form of both an essay and an exhibition she curated for Pace Gallery in 2016, Edwards articulates a thesis that "shifts analysis away from the black artist as subject and instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity." In the process, she becomes part of a swelling theoretical movement that attempts to debunk the notion of a unified, authentic "blackness" in favor of a more heterogeneous, unstable, and potentially emancipating identity-in-flux. Pronouncements of "post-blackness" grab the most headlines in this arena, but Anderson is more influenced by the musically-propelled poet, professor and philosopher Fred Moten and his theory of an eternally inaccessible archive. By way of famously iconoclastic French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and his 1996 book *Archive Fever*, Moten – in his 2003 book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* – argues that much like the idea of a core "self," the archive has always been unavailable, "always already obscure." And while this argument will not extinguish the continuing, arguably inherent desire to locate one's constitution in history, Anderson amplifies Moten's thinking by way of images, objects and references that warp under the weight of archival expectation. From popular sources like the

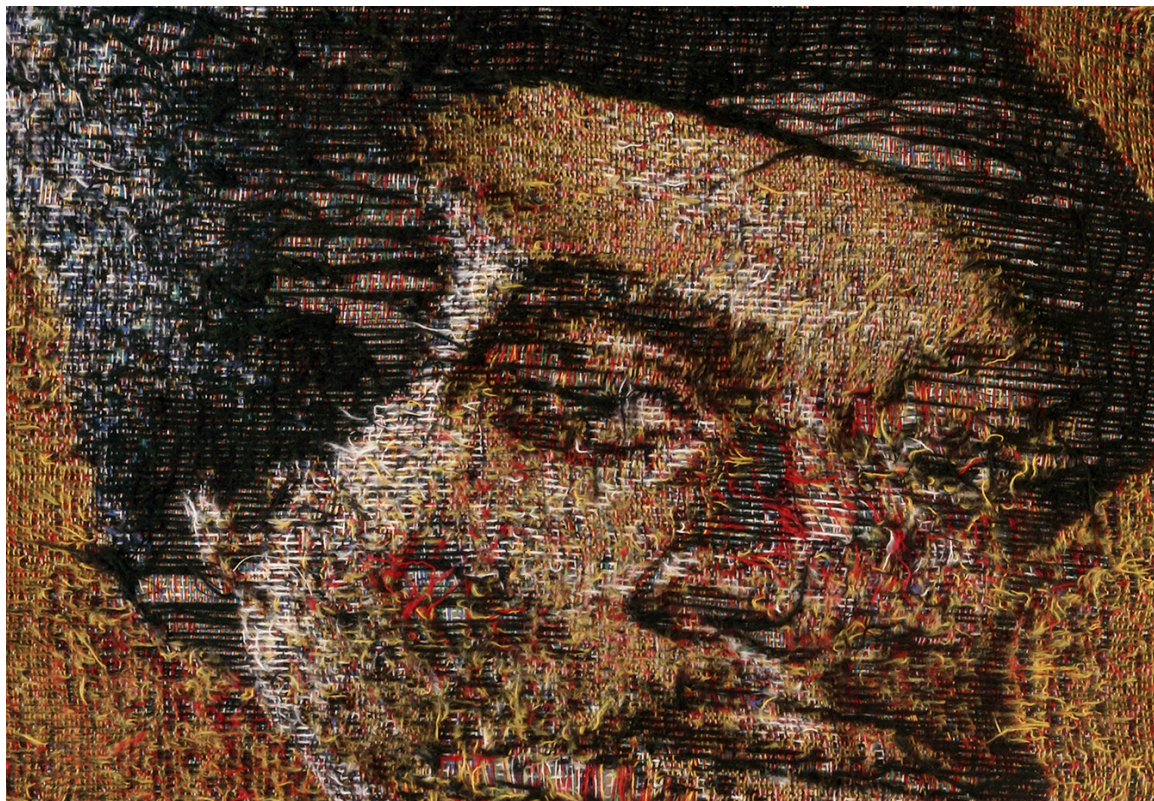
Clockwise from left:

drehen [detail], 2016.

die Leitung, 2016.

Zip, 2016.





The Sportsman [detail], 2016-2017.

TV miniseries *Roots* and *Ebony* Magazine, to 18th century Dogon African sculpture from the now tourist-laden region of Mali, he cites and skews abiding, yet compromised touchstones. Rather than lamenting the absence of indexes and/or irreducible origins though, he celebrates the ambivalence of a motley plurality. The same messiness that has led to violence and repression could also be the radical contingency that defies definition, simplification and containment.

As Anderson mangles his archival materials in this exhibition, limits our ability to access references, and distorts the purportedly linear course of legacy, he also draws reference to the defiant avant-garde movement of “dada.” Denouncing the supposedly rational thought that led to World War I, dada, in contemporary artist Adam Pendleton’s purview, chose “the heterogeneous, the frustrating and disruptive above clarity” – erecting an oracle in nonsense, belligerence and iconoclasm. In this spirit, merging avant-garde agency with a present call-to-arms, Pendleton wrote the Black Dada Manifesto in 2008 as a performative script, declaring:

Black Dada is a way to talk about the future

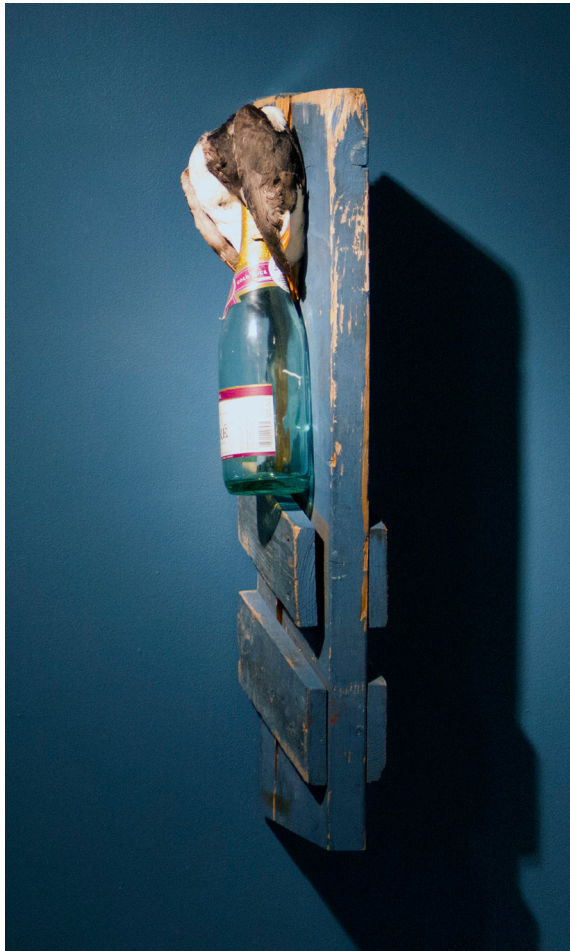
while talking about the past. It is our present moment. The Black Dada must use irrational language. The Black Dada must exploit the logic of identity. Black Dada is neither madness, nor wisdom, nor irony, nor naïveté. Black Dada: we are successive. Black Dada: we are not exclusive. Black Dada: we abhor simpletons and are perfectly capable of an intelligent discussion. The Black Dada’s manifesto is both form and life. Black Dada your history of art.

Positioning its aims puckishly as “a future-thinking-nostalgia-of-the-present,” Pendleton goes on to express that, “Black Dada is neither an ism nor a situation. It is pieced together like a tapestry, stitched in the margins of expressed language and compiled through lived relations. It possesses, as does all great writing, the uneven consistency of language on the run.”

Anderson does not expressly subscribe to Pendleton’s manifesto, nor does he count himself a Black Dada artist, or even one that would fall under Edwards’ “blackness in abstraction” thesis; but their writing provides a compelling foil nonetheless. For it is the ability of Anderson’s work to participate in



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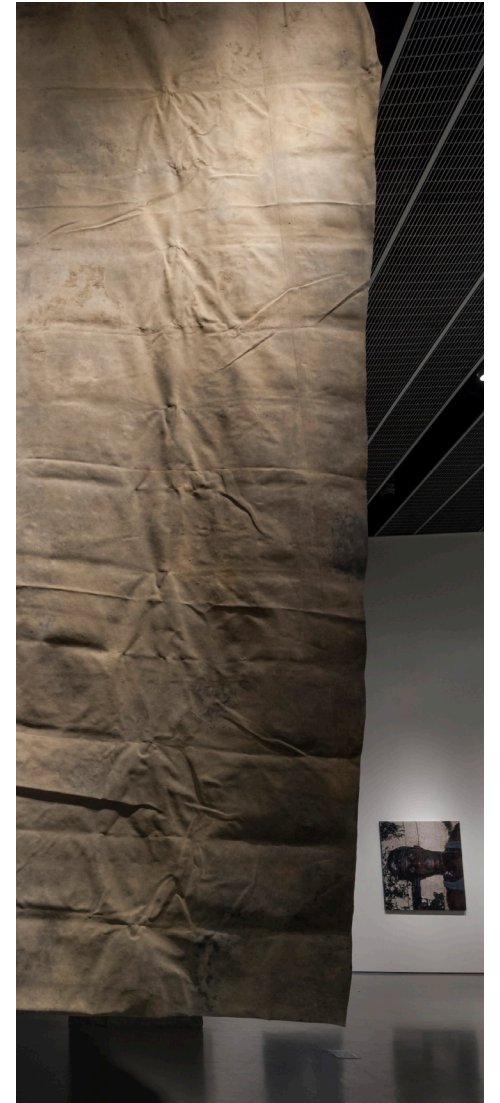
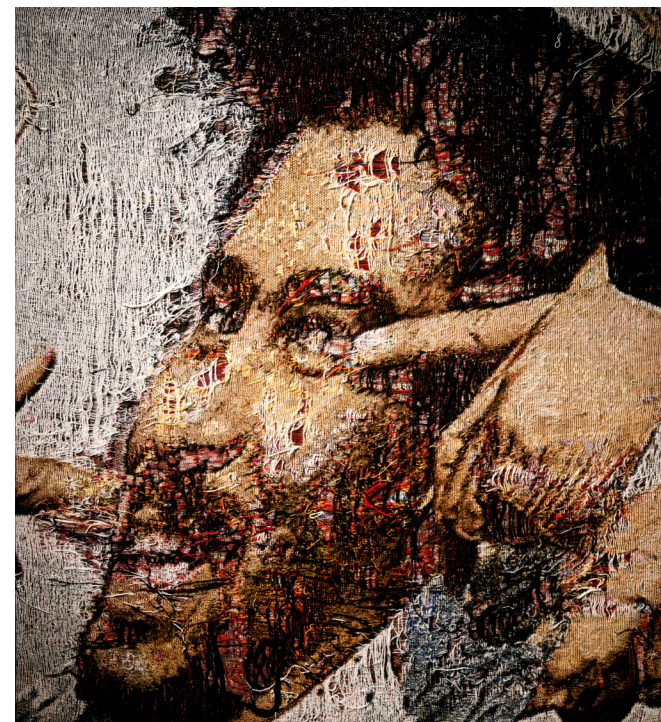


Previous page: *drehen* [detail], 2016.

Above: *Molotov Cocktail*, 2017.

major tenets of this thinking, as well to contradict its cornerstones, that makes his practice so unruly and so insightful. Much like he steps inside and outside the archive to stretch its parameters and frustrate its integrity, the hybrid nature of Anderson's work cultivates what he calls an “evasive proposal” – occupying every side of the argument (at one time or another) to complicate the answers. He never gives up the image or the weight representation carries, but does not shy away from pushing both to the brink of abstraction (and sometimes beyond); he revels in materials, objects and artifacts, but strips away much of their aura to push them into uncanny terrain. Every gesture is thus a dialectic, weaving together thesis and antithesis into complex, but no less potent, contradictions. From obvious to esoteric cases, like reversing the playback of *Roots* to fabricate a romantic and illusory return to Eden, Anderson states, “there is no archive (meaning an irreducible, stable site of secure meaning), only moments we believe to be the archive...” His use of tapestries in *Blak Origin Moment* animates this notion in manifold ways – collapsing old and new, digital and analog, authored and removed. Carrying the aura of a medium that preceded history painting and once occupied the pinnacle of art-making, Anderson turns it into a quasi-industrial vehicle woven by contract machinery. In so doing, sending the images he painstakingly manipulates to a faceless company who send them back in tapestry form, he simultaneously upholds and soils the legacy of this medium. In many of these works he performs the additional act of pulling out stitches and threads to further muddy the already distorted image – loosening the warp and weft to destabilize both figure and ground, content and surface, memory and mutation.

This is not, however, a project (or product) of nihilism, indecision or resignation. Much like the needle moves in and out of the surface it occupies in a tapestry, Anderson pierces archives, archetypes and origins to forge a perforated and circuitous path. Rather than plotting maps that proceed neatly from point A to B, *Blak Origin Moment* is about meandering rotations that subvert linear logic and thinking. To subdue the utopian aura of origins and engender critical reflexivity, Anderson thickens our course with detours, displacement and loops – explaining that in this work, “reading left to right is to read incorrectly. One must read *invaginatively*, which is to read oscillating from outside in, and vice versa.” His is thus a fecund knot of pursuits, desires and frustrations rather than conclusions or dead ends – turning the unmoored archive into a porous, malleable hub. For Anderson, “such a malleability could offer us a chance to delegitimize it as master” – turning uncertain footing and a contingent past into radical possibilities. Pendleton writes that, “nonsense is linked



with originality. Something is misunderstood because it is unprecedented.” In this *Blak Origin Moment*, the familiar grows strange, certainties are dim and the absence of absolutes becomes the beginning.

- SM 2017

Clockwise from top left:

Puppe, 2017.

Hide (vertical) [detail], 2016-2017.

Prior, 2016.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

NOEL ANDERSON

Blak Origin Moment

Curated by Steven Matijcio
February 10 – June 18, 2017

Generously supported by

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Noel Anderson (b.1982) is an Assistant Professor at NYU's Art and Art Professions Department in Print Media. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ohio Wesleyan University, a Master of Fine Arts from Indiana University in Printmaking, and a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University in Sculpture. Anderson was recently included in the Studio Museum of Harlem's exhibition *Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet, and Contemporary Art*, which included an internationally published book. He held an appointment as a Visiting Lecturer at Vanderbilt University, and was also a recent Visiting Artist and Lecturer at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, France.

All works pictured in this brochure are by Noel Anderson unless otherwise noted.

LIST OF WORKS

- *arbeiten: Phat Diptych [study, work, labor: Phat Diptych]*, 2016. Mixed media on Jacquard tapestry.
- *arbeiten: Soul Train [study, work, labor: Soul Train]*, 2016-2017. Mixed media on Jacquard tapestry.
- *die Leitung [the administration; the line-up]*, 2016. Distressed Jacquard tapestry.
- *der Raub [robbery, rape, booty]*, 2017. Two Jacquard tapestries.
- *drehen [turn, rotate, shoot]*, 2016. Five distressed Jacquard tapestries.
- *Education for the Resistant Black Object*, 2017. Mixed media.
- *Escapism (misnamed)*, 2016. Mixed media on erased Ebony Magazine pages.
- *Hide (horizontal)*, 2016-2017. Roofing rubber, dirt.
- *Hide (vertical)*, 2016-2017. Roofing rubber, dirt.
- *Molotov Cocktail*, 2017. Glass bottle, preserved bird, wood.
- *On the Other Hands-up*, 2016. Four Jacquard tapestries.
- *Prior*, 2016. Distressed Jacquard tapestry.
- *Puppe [doll]*, 2017. Doll.
- *The Sportsman*, 2016-2017. Mixed media on five distressed Jacquard tapestries.
- *STOOR*, 2016. Video.
- *This*, 2016. Distressed Jacquard tapestry.
- *West Africa*, 2012-2017. Education map.
- *Zip*, 2016. Mixed media.

All works courtesy of the Artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

Cover: *die Leitung* [detail], 2016.

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