

Press Release

Humblebæk, April 2021



(Arthur Jafa, *Big Wheel II*, 2018. 242 x 240 x 104 cm,
Barasch Carmel Family, Collection, Copyright Arthur Jafa)

ARTHUR Jafa: MAGNUMB

21 April - 31 October 2021

Soon, when reopening after the current lockdown, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art is opening the exhibition **MAGNUMB** by the American artist Arthur Jafa. Two and a half years in the planning, the exhibition will be the biggest presentation of Jafa's art to date. All of Jafa's work deals with the great and original creative power of Black American culture, as opposed to the harsh reality of Black American life.

Arthur Jafa is widely considered one of the most important artists working today. Over a long career, he has moved in and out of the worlds of film, music and art without ever making a permanent home in one. No matter where he has been, he has always been driven by the ambition to create or develop a Black American cinema with "the power, beauty, and alienation of black music." Bound up with this ambition is Jafa's lifelong interest in the specificity of Black American culture – what it excels at, such as music, and what it grows out of.

BEAUTY AND HORROR

The history of American slavery, with its continual, unrelenting repercussions, violence and oppression, both concretely and structurally, is a particularly defining factor for the artist. In his work, we see constant juxtapositions of beauty and horror. Beauty coming out of, and fed by, horror.

For the artist, the two phenomena are inextricably linked and rife with conundrums and complexity, as he puts it in his text *My Black Death*: *"The central conundrum of black being (the double bind of our ontological existence) lies in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are. Such that our efforts to eliminate those forces which constrain also functions to dissipate much which gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the good death (boa morte) to be embraced."*

CUTTING AND PASTING

Since childhood, Jafa has cultivated an obsession with cutting pictures out of books and magazines and pasting them into new constellations in his own picture books. This remains the starting point for his work. Jafa presents us with a volume of ready-made material combined to create new meaning in films, photographs and installations. Much of his material is sourced from popular culture, news footage and home videos online. The artist's favourite resource is YouTube.

INTRODUCING KEY WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION:

The exhibition features Jafa's key filmic works, including a new video work made specifically for this exhibition, alongside a large number of works in other media, several of which were also made for the occasion. For Louisiana, Jafa's work is an obvious continuation of the American tradition of Pop art, with its fascination with pop culture and social criticism. Pop art is a cornerstone of the museum's collection, with names like Warhol, Rauschenberg, Fahlström and Kogelnik.

LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH

Running seven and a half minutes, this film bombards us with found images to the sound of Kanye West's song *Ultralight Beam*. Images of everyday life – of genius, horror and resistance, glorious, pedestrian and violent alike. Barack Obama singing *Amazing Grace* in church. A father showing his son how the police treat people like them. Serena Williams dancing. Ordinary people dancing. Walter Scott being shot in the back by a police officer. Little kids leaving a car with their hands in the air. Police and protestors clashing. A woman twerking. Finally, we see the sun shining, an image of power and majesty.



Images: Stills from *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016. Press images are available for download at <https://press.louisiana.dk/>. Username: press • Password: moore

AKINGDONCOMETHAS

This film consists largely of footage from Black American churches, featuring sermons and gospel music. In one sequence, Jafa leaves the church behind and shows us news footage of California wildfires, a world in flames. The title refers to a millennialist term, “A kingdom cometh as”. Deliberately misspelled by Jafa, the term refers to the End Times and the ascent of believers into heaven. This work portrays a hearth of Black American culture – of music, critical thinking, the civil rights movement and community.

THE WHITE ALBUM

As the title implies, whiteness is the theme of this film. Again, we are presented with an array of found footage revolving around the nature of white privilege and white supremacy. From white fundamentalists like Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African Americans, to a nerdy guy dancing to Bon Jovi and white people who Jafa personally knows and tenderly portrays. Jafa’s work reveals some of the worst aspects of whiteness, but clearly distinguishes between being white and actively performing and asserting one’s whiteness, whether as violence, ignorance or something else.

AJBDQwave

Made specifically for this exhibition, this film represents a development of Jafa’s visual language. Unlike his other films, this one is not based on found images but was made with the help of computer animation. An ocean is seen, liquid and massive, frightening and beautiful at once. The sea, a central theme for descendants of enslaved people, represents the distance between a lost African origin and present-day life. While the approach is new, the work is closely related to Jafa’s other films in revealing the intimate link between the best and the worst of Black American culture.

EX-SLAVE GORDON

Here, Jafa has used one of the most famous photographs in the history of American slavery: Gordon, a formerly enslaved person, displays his mutilated back with great dignity, even grace.

The photo was made in 1863 after he escaped from a plantation in the state of Louisiana. Obsessed with this photo since he was a teenager, Jafa has given the two-dimensional photo a body as a three-dimensional wall sculpture. Through Jafa's digital manipulation, the whipping scars morph into dark waves down Gordon's back.

I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR PAST, I JUST WANT OUR LOVE TO LAST

The title of this wallpaper is taken from the James Brown song *Cold Sweat*. On one side, it shows a lynching scene with two young Black men hanging from a lamppost and a third lying dead on the ground. Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson and Isaac McGhie were lynched on 15 June 1920 in Duluth, Minnesota. Surrounding them, a crowd of white people in their Sunday best smile at the camera. The other side of the wallpaper shows a group of young men, who could be gang members, posing with guns. The work embodies Jafa's lifelong practice of combining found images to create new meaning.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

This wallpaper shows a group of children at the Whittier Primary School in Virginia, 1899. They are reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, which originally stated, "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." The pledge was later amended to include the words "under God". The children hail the flag with what was known as the "Bellamy salute". During World War II, this salute, because of its association with Nazism, became so fraught that it was eventually dropped. Jafa presents the photograph as is, with all its inherent tension.

BIG WHEEL II

This sculpture is made of a giant two-and-a-half-metre tall rubber tyre of the kind used in mining machinery. The wheel is wrapped in chains and features a hubcap of welded-together steel pieces. Jafa says, "[During slavery] Black people in the Americas were machines." The hubcap resembles the ocean in *AJBDQwave* and the back of *Ex-Slave Gordon*. *Big Wheel II* ties the Black body to slavery, coercion and mutilation. Like Gordon's back, the wheel's chain and the "scars" on the hubcap seem to take on an air of decoration, even beauty.

AN ORAL SOUTHERN STORYTELLER

Arthur Jafa, who recently turned 60, has always – no matter where he was in his career – participated in talks and panels and given numerous lectures. His closest friend, the writer and musician Greg Tate, describes Jafa "at the core [...] as an oral Southern storyteller."

As Jafa puts it, his talks for a long period were surrogates for works he did not do or was unable to do. Jafa's talks extend his other practices and, like them, centre on his interest in the existential conditions of Black American culture. The talks are an important supplement to his art, and vice versa.

ABOUT ARTHUR Jafa:

Starting out as a cinematographer, Jafa has worked with directors such as Spike Lee and Stanley Kubrick. Back in 1991 at the Sundance Film Festival, he won the award for best cinematography, for his work on the Julie Dash-directed film *Daughters of the Dust*. In recent years, Jafa has made music videos in collaboration with a number of distinctive American musical artists, including Jay-Z, Solange Knowles and, in 2020, Kanye West, for his song *Wash Us in the Blood*.

Last year, Jafa won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale, cementing his position in the global art world. The standout work at Venice was his video *The White Album*, which is on view at Louisiana.

Jafa is represented in Louisiana's collection with *APEX* (2013, video (colour and sound), duration 8 min. 12 sec.), acquired in 2019 with funding from Museumsfonden af 7. december 1966 and donations via louisiana.dk.

The exhibition is curated by Mathias Ussing Seeberg and will be on view in the museum's South Wing.

The exhibition is supported by the New Carlsberg Foundation. Textile sponsor: Kvadrat.

Realdania supports Louisiana's architecture exhibitions.

The C.L. David Foundation and Collection supports Louisiana Literature, Louisiana Live, Louisiana on Paper and other activities at the museum.

Catalogue: Accompanying the exhibition is a catalogue featuring Jafa in conversation with Jacob Holdt and Faith Icecold, an introduction by Mathias Ussing Seeberg and essays by NourbeSe Philip and Jared Sexton.

Interview video: In 2018, Louisiana Channel conducted a long interview with Arthur Jafa in his studio in Los Angeles. Watch it [here](#).

Press images: <https://press.louisiana.dk>. Username: press • Password: moore

For further information, please contact curator Mathias Ussing Seeberg mus@louisiana.dk or head of press Jan Hybertz Gøricke at jhg@louisiana.dk or +45 2858 5052.

Louisiana website: www.louisiana.dk. **Louisiana Channel:** <https://channel.louisiana.dk/>

Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 11:00–22:00. Saturday, Sunday and holidays, 11:00-18:00. Mondays closed.