

Press Release

James Bantone
Cuts of Love

26 November – 29 January 2021

Opening Thursday, 25 November 2021, 6 – 8 pm

In *Cuts of Love*, artist and photographer James Bantone extends his previous invocations of the barbershop — a typically heteronormative, masculine-coded site of gathering, communication and adornment — which he imbues with subversive, queer, formal and thematic gestures to express the intimacy of his own memories.

Though there has never existed an autonomous “Black” art, the Black artist today must operate as “post-black,” lest they succumb to the ideological condition of abjection. A somewhat vague yet inevitable neologism, post-black art can be understood as work by artists who, despite being adamant about not being labelled as “Black,” are in fact deeply concerned with redefining complex notions of Blackness previously confused by the white gaze.¹ By queering the post-black methodology and saturating his works with notions of horror which, crucially, do not persecute his subjects, Bantone returns this gaze, relaxing the “vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain” tension between the aberrant other and the phobic I through the invocation of humour and refusal, and as such, addressing the paradox of representational politics.²

Visible from through the gallery’s window to the street, *The Fade*, named for the ubiquitous hair cutting technique as well as the idiom referring to the act of progressively alienating oneself from a romantic relationship, uses a found image of a fogged up barbershop window which the artist embroidered to include the words “Give Me Something,” and the profile of a fang-toothed, orange-eyed, demonic cartoon. Though the steamy glass suggests a sexual fantasy, the normative context of the barbershop reduces any potential queer fantasy to a punchline: “You know when your barber cuts your hair so good, you wanna fuck him?” A looking glass of sorts, *The Fade* compels notions of disturbed perception which recur throughout the exhibition.

Flanking one wall of the main gallery space is the exhibition’s titular artwork, an eleven-image portrait series modelled by Bantone’s friends, styled according to his imagination of early 2000s fashion and beauty clichés, for example, appropriated “tribal” motifs shaved into short hair, or painted onto a synthetic blonde wig. (They are a version of the kind of posters and magazine editorials typically plastered to a salon wall or window, showing off the details of each model’s hair.) The alterity of these photographs is not caused by the fact of the subjects’ non-white and queer identities, but through the ways Bantone has affected the images as objects: scanning and reprinting each photograph, between printings, scratching and scribbling on the verso sides, suturing together deliberate tears with embroidery thread, deepening shadows, and brightening colours to a point of garishness. By concealing the evidence of his tangible and digital manipulations, Bantone invokes the memory of the image, or rather, the “shadow of memory,” seen here to cause a feeling of returned abjection.³

Bantone’s visual and aesthetic language is owed to his interest in contemporary meme and image sharing culture, and moreover, the visual currencies of early 2000s reality entertainment television as seen on channels such as MTV, which, for years propagated the myth of the Black urban male as lavish and brutal — an emblematic soapstar pitted against the equally over-visualised image of affluent whiteness — now completely

¹ Byrd, Cathy. “Is There a ‘Post-Black’ Art? Investigating the Legacy of the ‘Freestyle’ Show,” *Art Papers* 26, no. 6, November 2002, pp.35

² Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, “Approaching Abjection” (New York: Columbia University Press) 1980, pp.7

³ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, “Approaching Abjection” (New York: Columbia University Press) 1980, pp.5

subverted in new viral media, such as in the music videos of American rap star Lil Nas X, the so-called “champion of Black bottom culture, reclaiming Black homosexual expression.”⁴ Bantone reconciles these positions in *Profeta*, a vinyl sticker showing two lovers, and *Cuffin Season 03 - 05*, five polyester barber’s cloaks decorated with a pattern of jewels, brand logos and kissing men. But it is in *Tongues Untied*, a new sculptural group named for the 1989 Marlon Riggs experimental documentary film on the imposed “silence” of Black gay men, that Bantone makes horror of the current post-black aesthetic which, in its flippant style, can reduce queer issues. Gleaming mirrored barber’s clippers with cables coiled into stiff tails bite into long, pink tongues which droop down the walls and lurch across the floor. Though droll, this work does not mock the silence of the documentary’s subjects, but through the abject object-object agreement between tongue and clipper, critiques the frequent generalisation of the Black barbershop as a universal “safe space.”

In *Terminal Irony*, installed opposite a mural of a green spiral, a neoprene wetsuit-wearing figure struggles to free his head from a mirror. While previous iterations of this figure — the artist’s alter-ego, inspired by cartoon supervillains such as HIM from The Powerpuff Girls — would wear a mask of Bantone’s own face to invoke a sense of removed subjecthood and the oppositionality of the self and the other, the very absence of this figure’s head signals the apex of overidentification — a terminal irony. Wearing thigh-high leather boots which extend at the toes beyond reasonable measure, (another pair of boots, *Chronic Oversharer*, is placed elsewhere in the gallery space), this figure epitomises Bantone’s conception of the other at the heart of this presentation’s concern.

Olamiju Fajemisin

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⁴ Red Scare Podcast, “The Broken Buck,” 14’01. 4 August 2021.