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Arnold J. Kemp

*Less Like an Object and
More Like the Weather*

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Image: Arnold J. Kemp

Masks have haunted Arnold J. Kemp's pictorial and sculptural practice since the late 1990s. He first turned to drawing West African masks, spurred on by a hunch that traditional African carving may have more in common with minimalist sculpture and conceptually inflected image-making than we may at first intuit. In the early 2000s this project gave way to a series of photographs of the artist sporting a range of Klan hoods executed in fabrics reminiscent of Ghanaian Kente cloth, returning the concept of masking to its more traditional home in the context of performance, role play, and

stagecraft. These works' conception of identity politics as theater resurfaced in Kemp's installation *Headless* (2016), which marked the first appearance in the artist's *oeuvre* of the rubber Fred Flintstone mask. The cartoon character re-emerged in Kemp's photo series *Funny House* (*Speech Acts*), from 2019, in which the artist's hands manipulate the rubber mask to produce an array of monstrously deformed "expressions." Born from the artist's desire to produce works of art that can simultaneously amuse, enchant, and frighten the viewer, these photographs tap into the ambiguous stature of Fred Flintstone as the eponymous mainstay of one of the most financially successful and longest-running animated television series in history (*The Simpsons* surpassed it in 1997) as well as the irredeemable archetype of a casual, 1950s-style suburban bigotry and toxic masculinity that, in the wake of the Trump experience that these works may be referring back to, has aged especially badly. (Fred's proverbial fear and suspicion of all things "other" and divergent are, of course, complicated by the intensely homosocial charge of his pairing with Barney Rubble.) Indeed, seen within the context of America's most recent political trauma, there is inevitably an element of cathartic, vengeful violence folded into the parodic spectacle of a black man's hand "fisting" this talismanic symbol

of straight white male entitlement. The work's titular "speech acts" thereby become exercises in articulating uncomfortable "feelings," letting our hands do the talking we'd rather not be caught doing with our heads.

The title *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather* is a reference to a John Cage interview in which the American composer described the nature of his long-time collaboration with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. The exhibition features a meticulously laid-out grid of some 500 small ceramic objects displayed on a low, stage-like platform (the installation itself is titled *Talking to the Sun*). They were made by the artist while kneading the wet clay behind his back, without looking. Using just his thumbs and index fingers to poke two holes in each hand-sized slab of clay, Kemp produced hundreds of "masks." These ceramic artifacts are presented opposite two man-sized photographs of the aforementioned Fred Flintstone masks, prompting the question of who is watching whom – who is the audience (i.e., those who listen), and who is merely being looked at? What does this neatly arrayed armada of a thousand eyes hope to see? Given the symbology of masking in the history of theater (think of the archetypal smiling mask denoting comedy and its tearful double denoting tragedy), we might look upon the ghoulish crowd of ceramic objects as a choir or chorus of sorts. What are the members of this chorus whispering and murmuring about? Something as ethereal and ephemeral, perhaps, as the coalescing and dissipating of clouds—the ominous polysemy of "weather"?

Arnold J. Kemp (b. 1968) is a Chicago-based American artist whose work ranges across an array of media including installation art and sculpture, painting and photography, and performance and poetry. Over the years, Kemp has sought to articulate his longstanding critical interest in challenging and interrogating the politics of "othering" so central to the imperial project of Western enlightenment in a variety of forms and motifs, among which the mask stands out as the artist's most persistent iconographic concern.

Curated by Dieter Roelstraete

MEDIA INQUIRIES

Mark Sorkin | 773-834-8936 | msorkin@uchicago.edu

GENERAL INFORMATION

Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society
The University of Chicago
5701 S. Woodlawn Ave.
Chicago, IL 60637
773-795-2329

Web: www.neubauercollegiumgallery.com
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter: @UChiCollegium

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