

## Press Release

**James Bantone**  
**HORRIPILATIONS**

**2 December 2023 – 13 January 2024**  
**Opening December 1st, 6 – 8 pm**

Horripilations are as much about fear as they are about adrenaline. Involuntary, they represent a physical or psychological fear materialized in the skin. For artist James Bantone, the term functions like a green screen—a background, a becoming space, and dually, a deceptive, reconfigured environment suffuse with movement and manipulation of the body. Bantone's second solo-exhibition with Karma International, *HORRIPILATIONS*, extends his recurring querying / queering of the uncanny as a site of both horror and play.

Central to the presentation is the artist's exploration of contemporary identity obsession and cultural performance through the barbershop. *Horripilations* (2023), a new video work created during a summer residency at the Swiss Institute in New York City, follows a fictional hairdresser called the "Heartless" who parties around the city in a 50-inch wig covering her face and heart-shaped eye patch, rumored to be eyeless. A score by London-based artist Alx Dabo grounds the work in an enthralling sonic composition of ambling synths and echoing whispers. Bantone's friends are cast as characters who personify parodic gestures in euphoric delusion as they overlap from one liminal space (hallucinatory fantasy) to another—a green screen barbershop, a model dangling out of a fast-moving car crossing the Manhattan bridge, and looped nightlife footage. Eventually, the film culminates in a melodramatic murder. A visitor first encounters the film through enlarged stills adhered as stickers on the gallery's windows. The vinyl shows close-ups of individual characters with deadpan stares during the green screen scene, emphasizing a threshold of the public and the private folding in on itself. Here, the barbershop is condensed to a pose.

Inside the gallery, three-channels of frenetic sequences are projected on PVC fabric screen printed with stills of CCTV surveillance footage from actual barbershops. These blurred images hover on the video projections like a presence responding to light in the room. Consider this a space of elastic labor; elasticity as place stained by time, and labor as reconfigured self. Without denying or fetishizing the intimacy that emerges from the care rituals of a barbershop, especially for Black and Brown people, Bantone upends it as a space of hegemonic masculinity back into the orbit of desire. His inquiry attends to Eve K. Sedgwick's identification of the homosocial as a social bond between members of the same sex, typically men, often accompanied by feared difference or phobia<sup>1</sup> (difference of queerness / homophobia).

A series of nine small portraits titled *Entrepreneur of the Self* (2023) depict numerous hair mannequins that each contain subtle differences. We see slight degradations in their wigs, face, lips, eye make-up, price tags, and in Bantone's own intervention on the images. Achille Mbembe writes that under accelerating capitalism a new form of psychic life emerges based on artificial and digital memory. The human subject becomes fictionalized as an "entrepreneur of the self," a kind of "ready-made abstract form" characteristic of the new relationships it establishes between fact and fiction, capable of absorbing any content.<sup>2</sup> Bantone puts forward the mannequin as derivative of this phenomena. The object therein across retail spaces and store displays is always already under surveillance—the "I" remaining perpetually uncanny in its lack of care, or characteristics. A copy of a copy of a copy. Hannah Black suggests that the "four genders of character are: pretext, archetype, self, and fantasy."<sup>3</sup> To which do these faces, and Bantone's characters in *Horripilations*, belong? In this context the phrase "skin crawling," a sensation commonly associated with horror films, perhaps is an outcome of horripilations too. It is a tactile hallucination, a(skin)g, running away from itself onto another "I," reconfigured, another appropriated self as a monument of commodity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, "TWO THE WELL OF FANTASIES," in *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Lauren Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 103.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Black, *DARK POOL PARTY* (Los Angeles: Dominica/Arcadia Missa, 2016), 10

New sculptural works such as *OPEN (what? what? what?)* (2023), *If you see me and you tryna see what's up* (2023) and *OPEN (slatt)* (2023), are created from an accumulation of photographs of New York City barbershop façades rendered through an acrylic and gel lift transfer process on steel and aluminum sheets. Hung on the walls, they hold textured residue akin to what we might see on wheatpaste street advertisements. The stakes of Bantone's gestures are etherealization disguised as alienation—as an image fades it spills into an improvised soliloquy of ad libs drawn from lyrics by popular Black American rap artists referred to in the titles. The works cipher between traces of architectural exteriors and the documented memory of them, seen or spoken, rendered indiscernible. And what happens when we speak to emptiness?<sup>4</sup> In their prolonged emptiness, they take on the spirit of a non-place—a disquieting space of transience and anonymity.

We know what solipsism-fueled horror looks like when we address excess (think *Party Monster* (2003) or *Climax* (2018)) but what kind of horror emerges when we also talk about lack? In *HORRIPILATIONS* Bantone realizes a multidisciplinary exploration of both space and void unthreatened by a persistent search to circumvent displacement, consequence, or fear.

– Angelique Rosales Salgado

The artist would like to thank Azize Ferizi, Pe Ferreira, Alx Dabo, Julio Delgado, Nina Carelli, Luisa Popovic, Ali, Barbie, Memphy, Saint, Kai, Harley and Dion for their precious help.

"Horripilations" was made possible with the generous support from Pro Helvetia.

swiss arts council

**prohelvetia**

---

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Simóne Reynolds, *In Practice: You may go, but this will bring you back* (New York: Sculpture Center, 2021), Exhibition catalogue.