

Vaginal Davis
Giulia Essyad
G. B. Jones
Reba Maybury
Selma Selman

September 28 – November 2, 2024

In Barry Levinson's film *Man of the Year* (2006), political talk show host Tom Dobbs, played by Robin Williams, embarks on an unexpected presidential campaign. Before stepping on stage for a televised interview, his campaign manager tells him with brazen cocky assurance: "You're gonna kill. It's gonna work like a charm. Don't worry about a thing... You can go on and be President." For something to work 'like a charm' in this way, it must be intent with the subterfuge efficacy of modern day neoliberalism where charm is used as a weapon, a double-edged force that oscillates between seduction and deception. As highlighted in this scene and as found across the political spectrum, charm is the very tool used by the white patriarchal cisheteronormative elite to exert power and control.

The exhibition *like a charm* at Sentiment takes on this very notion as its point of enquiry and flips it on its head. Presented here are five intergenerational artists—Vaginal Davis, Giulia Essyad, G. B. Jones, Reba Maybury and Selma Selman—who explore the very language of patriarchal power as a means of reversing its repressive impact with alluring, humorous and caustic vigour. Traditional forms of representations embedded in the art historical canon are challenged, with the body functioning as an instrument both of critique and potentiality.

Five drawings by G.B. Jones (b. 1965, Ontario, Canada; based in Toronto)—a key figure of the Queercore movement that started in the mid-1980s, whose practice as an artist, filmmaker, musician, member of the all-women post-punk band Fifth Column and co-editor of the cult zine *J.D.s* emerged in the subcultural world of Toronto in the 1980s—depict various witches, both real and fictional, drawn from film and television. From Agnes Moorehead's portrayal of Endora in the 1960s American television series *Bewitched* to Sybil Leek, an early 20th-century English astrologer, psychic, and occult author, these figures radiate with defiance, standing imposingly within the picture plane. Building on her seminal *Tom Girls* series from the early 1990s—which subverts Tom of Finland's hyper-masculine, homoerotic imagery by replacing male figures with women engaged in sexual play—these recent works from 2017 further explore Jones' interest in challenging normative systems of representation both within and beyond queer communities. In this context, the witch, a powerful symbol of political and social disruption, offers a striking counterpoint to the male-dominated history of portraiture that has traditionally adorned the halls of power.

Vaginal Davis (born 1969 in Los Angeles; currently based in Berlin) is another prominent figure in the Queercore scene and featured in Jones' film *The Lollipop Generation* (2008). The explorations of power, gender and sexuality found in Jones' work are extended in Davis' multi-disciplinary practice that blurs the lines between performer and persona. Both self-described and described by others as a 'blacktress,' visual artist, celebrated film and documentary maker, cult figure, international superstar, spokesmodel, gossip columnist, influential socialite, and "drag terrorist", her work has never been restricted to one role. Davis began her career in the late 1970s, forming The Afro Sisters, followed by other punk bands such as ¡Cholita!; Pedro, Muriel & Esther; and black fag. Her work *Divvy The Booty of Monoglots*, 2017, included in the exhibition, originates from a lyric sheet she performed with her art music group *Tenderloin* at the Meltdown Festival in London in 2012. In this work, the traditional tropes of portraiture are unsettled: the body is fragmented where headless eyes and mouthless heads float across the picture plane and rendered using an array of media where traditional materials such as

pencil and watercolour paint are complicated through an alchemical blend of cosmetic products such as nail varnish and eyeshadow and other household items like cocoa butter and witch hazel. They act as tantalising yet unnerving illustrations to the lyrics themselves, which, laden with dark irony, might allude to the heterosexist language commonly found in popular music.

Through a variety of media from performance and painting to photography and video installations, artist and activist Selma Selman (born 1991 in Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina; lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands) also uses her own identity as a woman of Romani origins to explore the intersection of race, class and gender politics. Her work straddles the line between sculpture and painting, where scraps of metal are painted on with both realistic and expressionistic tones creating a dynamic interplay of text and figuration. In *Untitled*, 2020, the clothed body of a woman is depicted lying on a bed, evoking the tradition of the reclining female nude in painting. Yet the figure's piercing gaze challenges the viewer with a threatening air. In using metal as her medium, a material often found in the work of post-war male conceptual artists, Selman also defiantly usurps objectifying and repressive systems at play. The phrase 'I'm a lady like my mother' painted across the metallic surface of the work introduces the idea of a double portrait, simultaneously representing both the artist and her mother. The work comes to carry a dual meaning. It reflects on the cyclical oppression faced by Romani women both within their communities and in the broader societal context whilst also serving as a tribute to Selman's mother and women of Romani origin at large, where scavenged metal— used by her family for income— is transformed into a poignant commemorative portrait.

This concern with the traditional representations of the female body is also evident in the work of artist Giulia Essyad (born 1992 in Lausanne, Switzerland; lives and works in Geneva, Switzerland) whose multidisciplinary practice encompasses photography, video, language and performance. Three large-scale blueback prints titled *Blueberry Inflation.v1.2* (2021) repeat the partially naked body of a woman, the artist herself, whose demure expression evolves into one of open seduction. The colour of her body gradually shifts to blue, a recurring hue in Essyad's work that evokes the supernatural, drawing inspiration from the realms of video games, science fiction, and kink platforms. By reclaiming her image, Essyad subverts the othering effect of the male gaze.

In contrast, artist, writer and political dominatrix Reba Maybury (born 1990 in Oxford, UK; lives and works in Silkeborg, Denmark) eschews any representation of the female body in her diptych *Submissive Penis Prints* (2020). Through various media, from painting to sculpture, Maybury's conceptual practice centres on sex work, blurring the boundary between private and public spheres. The artistic production of her work is assigned to her submissives as a means of exposing and challenging the gender power dynamics inherent in sex work and the broader social fabric. In this series on view, a submissive has used his penis to make prints, applying Indian ink to watercolour paper. The resulting images resemble Rorschach test renderings, which psychologists use to assess personality traits and emotional functioning. This psychological reference serves as a commentary on the hidden emotional labour that sex workers often endure with their clients, who are preoccupied with their own desires. As the paper is folded, the shape of the man's genitals becomes smudged and distorted to abstraction. With caustic humour, Maybury dismantles the myth of the male artistic genius often associated with abstract art, reducing the phallus—the ultimate symbol of patriarchal power—to a point of impotence and absurdity.

like a charm presents a shifting understanding of embodiment that spans across generations at the intersection of identities of race, sexuality, and gender. The artists exhibited boldly seek to question, resist and counter oppressive forces by deploying playful incisiveness in their respective work. As we revisit our initial interpretation of the exhibition title, a new reading emerges: a charm indeed also signifies an ornament, a talisman imbued with otherworldly powers, often passed down from one person or generation to another, carrying with it a sense of personal and universal significance. In this context, the works on display reflect both individual and collective experiences, serving as guiding forces of resistance and empowerment in an increasingly repressive world.