

Kai Matsumiya

Elliott Jamal Robbins

Feats of Strength

June 1st – July 19th

Opening reception: Sunday, June 1st, 6-9pm.

Feats of Strength presents a new body of work by Elliott Jamal Robbins, delving into fragmentation, desire, and the tension between visibility and erasure. Among the work's central references, the influence of Jean Genet is particularly resonant; especially in the stop-motion watercolor sequence *Fantasmagorie*, whose title nods to Genet's theatricality and fascination with illusion, contradiction, and disappearance. Like Genet's layered language—abject and erotic, political and dreamlike—Robbins' compositions resist moral clarity and narrative cohesion. They stack unstable images atop one another, enacting rather than explaining. The work embraces contradiction and fragmentation, lingering in interior states and unresolved gestures. In *Fantasmagorie*, a figure leans into a kiss only to dissolve frame by frame into smoke. Painting by painting, gesture vanishes. The act is performed and undone, seen and unmade.

As Anne Carson writes in *Eros the Bittersweet*, "Desire moves. Eros is a verb. It requires a space to cross." Robbins dwells in that space—the interval between touch and disappearance, presence and absence, yearning and collapse. Their images are suspended mid-gesture, capturing eros not as fulfillment but as tension, delay, deferral.

In *Feats of Strength*, Robbins assembles note card-sized drawings, works on paper, and small paintings that drift between intimacy, rupture, legibility and refusal. Left mostly unframed, these modestly scaled compositions maintain a raw, notational quality. They function not as closed narratives but as fragments—an index of sensations, tensions, and private symbols that resist resolution.

The works frequently revolve around the figure of a protagonist—a spectral or sometimes cartoonish presence who reappears in various guises across drawing and animation. The figures seem to navigate a collapsing interior world filled with distortions and surreal thresholds. Portals recur: shadowed doors opening into the desert Southwest; a square of pink mist hovering in an ambiguous field; the glowing face of a TV set viewed from a couch: each a threshold between the visible and the unknowable. These visual doorways are not routes for escape so much as mirrors for longing, confinement, or absurdity.

Robbins' visual language often invokes the uncanny charm of animation, including contorted Disney-like figures that are stretched, broken, or made strange. There is humor here, at times slapstick, at times haunting, where familiar forms buckle under emotional weight or collapse into nonsense. The result is a world that feels as internally logical as it is psychically unstable.

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While Robbins's work remains deeply aware of the history and politics of representation, *Feats of Strength* is simultaneously a critique of representation demands, what it reveals, and what it forecloses. As Robbins notes:

"I still believe deeply in the importance of representation, particularly representations of Black people and Black life—but I seek a mode of working that is not servile to didacticism or performativity. It remains a radical act, I think, to be Black and solely or primarily concerned with interiority—concerned with anti-performance, with the invisible or the unspoken."

That insistence on interiority extends to a suspicion of aestheticism itself. The work acknowledges the seduction of surface, beauty, and legibility but never surrenders to them. They *must* be interrogated not merely for their quality but for their signified acts of violence. If performance reduces interiority to spectacle, then aesthetic polish risks reducing the unknowable to image. *Feats of Strength* holds itself at that edge: resisting beauty when it threatens to flatten, resisting coherence when it promises false resolution. Theirs is a practice of deliberate unmaking—a refusal of aesthetic compliance in favor of psychic truth.

This refusal—of spectacle, coherence, or tidy narrative—is threaded through the entire project. Robbins' note cards, a practice which began in 2019, are dense with diaristic inscriptions, coded marks, and emotional residue. Influenced by David Lynch's idea that a film can be constructed from 70 index cards, they build a deliberately impossible narrative: one of rupture, drift, and recurrence. Nothing settles. Each fragment pushes against the next. Line becomes a mode of drift. Color and gesture become sites of interruption.

Painting, perhaps the most burdened of representational forms, is for Robbins not a fixed statement but a site of flicker and slippage. In *Feats of Strength*, painting is treated not as the end point of depiction, but as something that can be undone, unmoored, even animated. Several works are subsumed into film, becoming moving images that stutter and evaporate as merely *frames* to stop-motion media. Robbins turns painting into phantasmagoria—a medium of haunted surfaces, projected absences, and impossible proximities.

Feats of Strength is not a resolution, but a refusal of resolution. It is a study in collapse and persistence—of the image, the body, and the story that can never quite be told.

Elliott Jamal Robbins (b. 1988, Oklahoma) (he/him/they/them) is a multi-media artist with a focus on works on paper and moving images. Selected exhibitions include Nagel Draxler (Germany); Blum and Poe (CA), Drawing Center (NY); Park View (CA); Kunsthalle Kade (Amsterdam, Netherlands); Housing Gallery (NY); Phoenix Art Museum; Greene Naftali Gallery (NY); Flint Institute of the Arts; Martos Gallery (NY); and Taschen Presents (FR). They received their MFA from the University of Arizona (2017). Their works have been reviewed in Art Forum, Hyperallergic, Contemporary Art Daily, and Time Out New York.

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