

What can we say of art that leaves no trace?
That its existence is purported, its absence assured?

Since 1997, Otis Houston, Jr., aka Black Cherokee, has made art on the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive at 125th Street. Using his body as his primary medium for performance, and working at such a congested crossroads he has found the largest audience for any artist, in some sense larger than the daily droves of all New York City's museums combined.

Though known to many, he remains unknown to most.

Dozens of YouTube videos with thousands of views later, a profile in The New York Times, and a like on Instagram from the art dealer Gavin Brown, this exhibition at ROOM EAST marks the artist's gallery debut. Like Jiri Kovanda's undocumented performances on the streets of Prague in the 1970s, or the peripatetic actions of Fluxus, his peers in performance include Acconci, Burden, Oppenheim, Schneemann, among others. His use of text recalls the blunt force of Kruger, the poetics of Holzer, or at times the bald irony of Ruscha. His sculptures have a similar improvisatory nature of the found object assemblage of Jimmie Durham.

Houston started making collages after taking an art class during his incarceration 1984-1990. The works in the present exhibition were selected from the 1980s and 90s, a highly charged era, during which the tumult of political and corporate powers were channelled through the print media of the time, and consumerism was all ugly sweaters, and padded shoulders. These collages are but a fraction of the work that he has made, and yet they represent the bulk of what is preserved of his artistic output.

In some respects Houston's collages are the progeny of the diametric cultural polarities discussed in Kirk Varnedoe's "High and Low" exhibition at MoMA in 1990. Since the era bookended by the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992, and the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York 1999, race and society remain hot button issues, kindling for the resurgent conservative forces of the America that birthed a new mainstream of mistrust.

Otis Houston, Jr. (born 1964 in Greenville, S.C.) lives and works in New York City.

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