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Big Appple presents

Guess Mine Is Not the First Heart Broken

An exhibition by Nina Mhach Durban & Athen Kardashian

June 6, 2026 – September 13, 2026

Disillusioned after yet another disappointment caused by Danny (John Travolta), her summer romance whom she unexpectedly reunites with at the beginning of the school year at Rydell High, Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) steps out of her bedroom and onto the doorstep of the family home. Under the moonlight, she sings:

Guess mine is not the first heart broken, my eyes are not the first to cry...

This scene, taken from *Grease* (1978), lends its title to Nina Mhach Durban and Athen Kardashian's exhibition. The artists appropriate and recreate elements from the film's set design: a James Dean bedspread, VHS tapes, make-up products, pennants, and an annotated original Grease script. Through these pieces of merchandise and popular archives, they reactivate a whole constellation of affects and stories attached to the film and to American teenage culture.

An ode to the 1950s, the cult musical shaped the imaginary of a fantasised America for several generations. Beneath its gently nostalgic surface, Guess Mine Is Not the First Heart Broken is nevertheless an exhibition about disillusionment: the disillusionment of first heartbreak, but also that of the American Dream's glossy veneer, already beginning to crack. With age, one's gaze changes. Encased in leather jackets and varsity sweaters, we see grown actors awkwardly playing teenagers, their overly white teeth and foundation-coated, waxen skin barely concealing the illusion of a country built upon oppression and violence.

In the postwar years (the film is supposedly set in 1958), developers of American suburban homes left unfinished spaces on the upper floors of houses. Homeowners could therefore build an additional room. For the first time, children and teenagers gained an independent space and experienced *a room of one's own*[1] where they could pin up their idols, display the cultural goods they consumed, and surround themselves with the references that would shape the future adult inhabiting that space.

1 *In A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, Virginia Woolf identifies two essential conditions for a woman to be able to write: money (an annual income of five hundred pounds) and a room of her own, free from the demands and constraints of family life or marriage.

In *Grease*, the bedroom is a central setting: a place for crying into one's pillow and hosting sleepovers. Nina and Athen's installation functions in a similar way. The objects on display indirectly narrate the person, or perhaps the sum of several people, who might inhabit such a space —a refuge poised between intimacy and the outside world.

In *Pornotopia*, Paul B. Preciado argues that the figure of the teenager emerged in the early 1940s not so much as an age category but through "their capacity to consume without moral restriction." Teenagers became a new social group and a new marketing target. A "youth culture" emerged "to designate a set of new social practices characteristic of these adolescents consuming music, alcohol and drugs, escaping for several years the restrictions imposed by suburban morality, family and labour."[2]

As artist Dan Graham writes, the emergence of this new class was made possible by postwar social changes. Unlike their elders, "teenagers were not required as a labour force immediately after school."[3] They now possessed both time and a minimum amount of disposable income to spend.

In Grease, these teenagers with time on their hands appear obsessed with romance and flirtation. This image of 1950s youth leading lives supposedly centred on sexual excess fuelled countless fantasies within postwar suburban America. Sociologist Herbert J. Gans, who spent several years living in Willingboro, a suburb of New Jersey, collecting the grievances of young people who had not chosen to live there, recounts some of the absurd and grotesque rumours circulating at the time:

« There were rumors of teenage orgies […] The most fantastic rumor had 44 girls in the senior class pregnant, with one boy singlehandedly responsible for six of them. »[4]

In reality, the story stemmed simply from the fact that two girls in the same class had become pregnant at the same time.The gap between adult fantasies and the realities of teenage life is striking. Bedrooms were small, often shared, and the walls of suburban houses far too thin to freely invite friends over, let alone sexual partners. The era remained profoundly puritanical.

While this obsession runs throughout the film, it also reveals a deep asymmetry between boys and girls. The song *There Are Worse Things I Could Do*, performed by Stockard Channing as Rizzo, constitutes a key moment in the film. Until then portrayed as cynical, aggressive and sexualised, Rizzo finally breaks under the pressure of the rumours circulating about her. Yet the school readily

2 Paul B. Preciado, *Pornotopie, Playboy et l'invention de la sexualité multimédia*, Paris, Climat, 2010, p. 57.
3 Dan Graham, « The Artist as Producer »,1978 extract from Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power – Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1999, p. 1
4 Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners, Ways of life and politics in a new suburban community,* New York, Pantheon Books, 1967, p. 210.

accepts visible male sexuality: boys constantly talk about sex, Danny is celebrated when exaggerating his exploits, and the T-Birds[5] build their identities around female conquests. When Rizzo embraces a comparable freedom, however, she becomes morally condemnable.

By mobilising these archives and obsolete objects, Nina Mhach Durban and Athen Kardashian reveal the power of globalised fictions to shape realities and lives, but also the difficult construction of identities, subjectivities and forms of otherness. A femininity to perform. A masculinity to prove. A desire to control. Yet the exhibition remains above all a love letter to the film itself, and to the way these images will continue to haunt the present for as long as there are broken hearts.

Guess Mine Is Not the First Heart Broken.

Clément Hébert

Biography : Athen Kardashian and Nina Mhach Durban (both b. 2000) are a British-Asian artist duo raised and based in London. Their collaborative practice is founded upon an open and ongoing dialogue examining how to distil an abstract memory, feeling or sense into a new and physical language. Piracy, age, ownership, love & circumstance all take effect on the work's materials resulting in an articulation of personal and marginalised histories.

Big Appple is an artist-run space founded in 2024 and located within a fairground structure at 401 Rue du Pommier in Anderlecht. The exhibition space is regularly expanded through furniture elements conceived and designed by invited creators. The lighting fixtures were designed by Arnaud Eubelen, while the entrance door was created by Joseph Dofny.

5 The T-Birds are the gang of rebellious boys in *Grease*. With their leather jackets inherited from *Rebel Without a Cause*and their obsession with cars, flirting, and masculinity, they embody the imaginary of 1950s American youth culture.