FILL THE VOID
29 January – 12 March, 2022

Cory Arcangel
Sadie Barnette
Crystal Z Campbell
Jonathon Rosemond
Gary Simmons
Joe Smith
Paul Anthony Smith

To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending.

- All About Love by Bell Hooks (2000)

The interruption of the pictorial subject by concealment, obfuscation, or erasure disturbs the viewer’s passive consumption of art, creating tension between visibility and invisibility, tempering legibility, and interrogating the misrepresentation of marginalized subjects. Working from archives or other readymade materials, the artists in Fill the Void make meaning through extractive interventions. Transformed through various processes and material engagement, the works in this exhibition highlight the powerful presence of absence while evoking spectral memories and ghostly residues. In these works, the void is full of meaning.

In Crystal Z Campbell’s series Notes from Black Wall Street, the artist revives the historical record of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre from a century of omission. In one of the most brutal racial terror attacks in American history, a thriving and prosperous Black enclave in Oklahoma was fire-bombed by a violent white mob. Hundreds of residents perished and the Greenwood District, commonly known as “Black Wall Street,” was demolished. As a ground for the series, Campbell began with archival photographs documenting the rebuilding of the Greenwood District and then embedded the landscapes with vibrant compositions in paint and shards of fired clay. While evoking the scars borne by generations of Black families, the work resuscitates lost memories, reanimating the images marks and gestures that revive a “community that danced, built, breathed, paced, planned, studied, worshipped, shouted, debated, shared, whispered, fought, watched, practiced, and dreamed there.”

Just as Campbell approaches a public secret with radical love, Sadie Barnette interrogates state
archives with intimacy and care. A 500-page file from the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program serves as the ground for Barnette’s series of works related to the artist’s father, Rodney Barnette, a leader in the Black Panther party who founded the Compton, California chapter in 1968 and was surveilled, stalked, and harassed by the FBI for years. In *Untitled (People’s World)*, Barnette splashes copies of these documents with bursts of pink aerosol paint in varying degrees of opacity that riff on redaction practices, temper legibility and complicate their tenor with high femme aesthetics.

As in the aforementioned works, Jonathon Rosemond’s oeuvre embraces Blackness through readymade materials. In a new series of four works, the Minneapolis-based artist begins with a different kind of archive: coloring books. Rosemond filled shapes on both sides of readymade pages with opaque black marks, doubly conflating the images and obscuring the original outlines. After scanning the images, the artist layered them with digital gestures and finally used an image transfer process to relocate them to packaging tape. The choice of mundane, precarious material is an important element of Rosemond’s practice.

Also relying on readymade illustrations for children, Gary Simmons’ *Erasure* series features racist cartoon imagery from the 1930s and 1940s that emerged from sinister traditions of blackface and minstrelsy. Simmons reproduced these caricatures on blackboards sourced from his studio in an abandoned New York City schoolhouse, and then blurred them by smearing the chalk with his hands. Simmons’ use of pedagogical motifs, in particular readymade chalkboards, led to the formal and aesthetic breakthrough that would inform much of his subsequent work. As the artist explains: “I started to think about how images on blackboards can never be fully erased. It was about trying to erase a stereotype and the traces of the racial pain that you drag along with you.” *Black Chalkboard (Double Grin)* was included in the Walker Art Center’s exhibition *No Place (Like Home)* in 1997.

Paul Anthony Smith’s work explores identity within the African diaspora through the lens of his experience as a Jamaican-American. The title of his work in this exhibition, *The Violence of His Embrace of Things American is Embarrassing*, references various readings of Frantz Fanon’s “Black Skin White Mask” and James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” related to notions of colonization, vanity and desire. The photographs feature graveyards in the artist’s native Jamaica and in Vieques, Puerto Rico. By digitally converging these images, the artist flattens time and space into an imaginary field that speaks to W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness.” Smith overlays his work with marks produced through picotage, a process that involves puncturing the surface with a sharp ceramic tool to produce prismatic geometries. The patterns become a luminous veil that both obscures and protects his subjects from external gaze.

In the center of the exhibition lie two sculptures by Minneapolis-based artist Joe Smith. Employing readymade materials commonly used for concealment and protection – plastic sheeting, blankets – and coating the latter in an unstable, slow-wicking salt solution, these works immediately conjure coffins occupied by shrouded bodies in various states of decay. Accompanying these sculptures is a vacuum-sealed painting that has been treated with a reactive substance. By enveloping and containing work in a state of organic flux, Smith gestures at our desires for preservation and sanitation, while simultaneously raising questions about the material histories and memories hidden within.

In the Cinema, Dreamsong is pleased to present *Totally Fucked*, a work from Cory Arcangel’s iconic series of modified video games. The work is also downloadable as a ROM file from the artist’s website and Github account. Like all of the artists in *Fill the Void*, Arcangel works from readymade materials – in this case, the classic Nintendo video game ‘Super Mario Bros.’ By hacking the cartridge, the artist traps Mario in a sky-blue void, stranding him atop a question mark block. Permanently stuck, Mario looks from side-to-side, unable to progress through the game’s challenges and levels. Though *Totally Fucked* was made nearly twenty years ago, its resonance as an apt reflection of humanity’s prospects and as a meditation on technological and social progress is as poignant as ever.

* The font employed for the title of this exhibition is rendered in “Redaction”, a typeface distributed under the Open Font License and commissioned by Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts.

**Press Contact**

Rebecca Heidenberg
rebecca@dreamsong.art
646.703.4473

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Dreamsong is pleased to present *A feather plucked from its bird*, a solo exhibition by Minneapolis-based artist Benjamin Merritt. For the artist, the process of printmaking is deeply related to his experience of living with a chronic illness. According to Merritt, “The print is a metaphor for continual healing, its morphing physicality a reflection of the body.”

The artist works from copperplate etchings, scraping away the copper to transpose a long history of gestures and marks on to the final print. His practice serves as a vehicle to think through his body, tracing it through layers of marks and poetry to create a communal, reflective space for what it means to be sick.

The exhibition is titled *A feather plucked from its bird* after Merritt’s eponymous new artist’s book: a variable collection of unbound handmade prints produced by the artist at Highpoint Center for Printmaking through multiple printmaking processes including etching, monoprint, drypoint, aquatint, soft ground and paper stencil. The poems in the collection express the material conditions of illness - how it affects personal relationships, the costs of medicine, chronic pain and its absence, and the tension between being cared for and giving care. This body of work is an affirmation of sick embodiment. Echoing Merritt’s experience of constantly adapting to remain safe in an ableist society, each edition contains subtle deviations in their marks and gestures.
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Benjamin Merritt (b. 1997 in Simpsonville, South Carolina) graduated from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 2019. Merritt has attended residencies at the Ox-Bow School of Art & Artists’ Residency in Saugatuck, Michigan, the Jerome Emerging Artist Residency at the Anderson Center (2021) in Red Wing, Minnesota, Spudnik Press in Chicago and the Jerome Emerging Printmakers Residency at the Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis. He is the recipient of the Minnesota State Arts Board Creative Support for Individuals (2021) which helped fund the production of Merritt’s artist book, A feather plucked from its bird. His work has been included in several group exhibitions including at the International Print Center, New York, Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis, and the Northern Illinois University Art Museum, Dekalb, among other venues. This exhibition is the artist’s first solo presentation.

ABOUT DREAMSONG

DREAMSONG is a multidisciplinary arts venue and commercial gallery situated on a small compound in Northeast Minneapolis. Comprised of a storefront gallery, cinema, connecting courtyards, and an artist’s residence, DREAMSONG is a flexible and adaptable home for contemporary art. We intend to foster dialogue between the local Minnesota arts scene and the broader contemporary artworld by facilitating collaborations and building connections between artists, filmmakers, curators, and scholars.

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