

**GBE  
439 W. 127TH STREET  
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**ARTHUR JAJA  
*AIR ABOVE MOUNTAINS, UNKNOWN PLEASURES***

**MAY 4 – JUNE 10, 2018  
OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, MAY 4, 2018 from 6:00PM**

In his first solo exhibition in New York City since 2000 Arthur Jafa expansively extends his exploration of ontological Blackness\* as a generative and pluripontential phenomenon—one capable of addressing the social stresses weight, fissures and breaks of being Black—and concomitantly, Black Being and Thingification—in the world.

The range of media and sculptural forms utilized in the exhibition builds on Jafa's ongoing, revelatory pursuit and mastery of lyrical expressive means to represent the recorded presence of shock, horror, trauma, transcendence and transgressive impulses in the history, performance and existential grip, of Blackness.

Criminality, judgment and the legacy of legal and rhetorical violences perpetrated on Black female and trans bodies turn up in the exhibition's introductory work, Jafa's girdled and corseted self-portrait "Mary Jones."

Historian's Jonathan Ned Katz and Tavia Nyong'o's scholarly presentation "Visualizing The Man-Monster" provided the inspiration. Mary Jones, born Peter Sewally, was a streetwalking Black sex worker and "adept" pickpocket in 1836 New York. Sewally/Jones was described in newspapers of the time as "dressed elegantly" and "in perfect style with white earrings and a gilt comb." After arrest for stealing a white client's wallet, "the arresting officer also discovered," said The Sun newspaper, that the prisoner, "to sustain his pretension, and impose upon men" -- Katz interjects that, "here seventeen words in clumsy Latin complete the sentence. Translated, the phrase says that the woman impersonator 'had been fitted with a piece of cow [leather?] pierced and opened like a woman's womb ["vagina" is the intended word], held up by a girdle. Educated, Latin-reading, upper-class men could apparently contemplate such details without harm; women and lower-class persons of either sex could not."

Katz continues: "A week or so after Sewally's trial and sentencing, a lithograph of him dressed as a woman, and titled, "The Man-Monster; Peter Sewally, alias Mary Jones" was published in New York City. Despite the "monster" status invoked by its title, the print portrayed Sewally as a rather ordinary-looking and unthreatening black woman in a clean white dress with small blue flowers. The prosaic, even genteel image countered his alleged monster status. The lithograph and newspaper accounts suggested that Sewally's cross-dressing, theft, and sexual conduct were sensational in 1836. But these behaviors were by no means as threatening in 1830s New York as they would have been in, for example, the early 1600s."

Jafa's provocative enshrouding in garments alluding to Jones' utilitarian, wily and theatrical gender disguise furthers the artist's detailed representation of sexual complexity and class-leaping daring within Black America and mock-horror at the same time within the imaginations of the nation's allured and seduced lily upper crust.

Jafa's new video work, *akingdoncomethas*, serves up a visual paean to Black Christian worship ceremonies, tropes and rituals, and builds on Jafa's anthological obsessions with sequencing flows of African American orality, music, stagecraft, and unbridled, electrifying performance into gripping cinematic tapestries. The sensuous release found in the melodramatic performance—musical and sermonic— of Black Christian faith compels Jafa's symphonic focus in *akingdoncomethas*. The artist is also driven to display how the tribally sanctified spaces in which those forms of worship and spirited performance takes place are Black pocket-universes of intense energy, eloquence and illumination—ones



that exist in simultaneous alignment and detachment from the poetics of Black political and popular culture but are as well-organized as those realms around the acquisition and consumption of material wealth for culturally redemptive purposes. As with his triumphant and troubling video work, *Love is the Message, The Message Is Death*, Jafa deploys found footage in *akingdoncomethas* as a means of channeling his own primal obsessions with unbridled Black performance—particularly those rich, majestic and signifying shows of force found in predominantly Black-attended gatherings; how they eye-poppingly erupt on the screen as artfully cathartic, socially emancipatory, communally self-loving and subjectively self-possessed.

The show's sumptuous and generous photographic tableaux, *APEX GRID* provides a contemplative and static replication of his warp-speed video masterpiece of the same title.

The shackled and scarred seven-foot truck tires seen in *Big Wheels* configure a return to thematics found in Jafa's exhibitions from earlier in the century—visual conceits inspired by the native Mississippian's long time homegrown fascination with demolition derbies and monster truck stadium shows. These works also speak to the artist's perception of automotive and locomotive industry products as gestural markers and carriers of poetic, political resonances—as figurations emblematic of the Black modernity and futurism inscribed within the epic practices of the road tripping troubadours who created and propagated the soundtrack to Delta's mobile blues culture.

\*per reeds man, composer and orator Rahsaan Roland Kirk's grand rhetorical spelling on his 1972 Atlantic album of the same name.

- Greg Tate

Artist, filmmaker, cinematographer, TNEG (motion picture studio) co-founder, Arthur Jafa was born in Tupelo, Mississippi and currently resides in Los Angeles.

Jafa's notable solo, group, gallery and museum exhibitions include Artists Space, New York, NY (1999); Okwui Enwezor's traveling exhibition *Mirror's Edge*, BildMuseet—University of Umea in Sweden / Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada / Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy / Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland (1999); 2000 Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Black Box, CCAC Institute, Oakland, CA (2000); Media City Seoul, Korea (2000); Bitstreams, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2001); Social Formal, Westaelischer Kunstvein, Münster, Germany (2002); *My Black Death*, ARTPACE, San Antonio, TX (2002); The Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA (2015); The Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA (2016); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY (2016); The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2016); *Nothis Stable under Heaven*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (2018). Jafa was recently featured in a solo exhibition entitled "A Series of Utterly Improbably, Yet Extraordinary Renditions" (cat.) at The Serpentine Gallery in London in 2017, which is currently on view at the Julia Stoschek Foundation in Berlin until November 2018. He will hold a solo exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archives in December 2018. His work is represented in celebrated private and public collections worldwide, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The High Museum, The Dallas Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Museum of Fine Art in Boston, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Stedelijk Museum, The Perez Art Museum in Miami, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.

