

Don't Pay any Attention to The Creature Behind the Curtain

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty of the School of Art to satisfy the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Art.

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## **HOW I LIVE: An Introduction**

What is art if not a manifestation of will, an expression of curiosity, and extension of self? If it is none of these things, then perhaps at least it is a tool for understanding others; much like dreams or nightmares we are gifted its presence and though we may forget it's shape over time or fail to grasp an exact meaning there is a feeling we're left with in the end that convinces us to give a damn about something in our daily lives. My work is a means of ensuring my own survival by dissecting the elements that make up my being and creating from these pieces a celebration of the weird double-edged experience of being alive. Moving from piece to piece amongst my work, I utilize two primary modes of speaking in a visual sense: First talking in layered and mesmerizing vignettes composed as moving images that function like anecdotes or fables and second by presenting the viewer with documentation of that which can't be known, images made from nightmares and worries that confront us before we can truly move to correct our paths. I don't know what it is like to float weightless in the void of outer space, but I know the loneliness of a room where I must represent everyone that looks like me and how suffocating that environment can be.

Utilizing my own body in my work I make use of it as an avatar. I am a conduit for whatever entity I must embody and the conversations I can have through this flesh can be intimate, but I am not bound by any duty to simplify my messages and explain my blackness or any other aspect of myself. I am drawn to the elements of horror and the pulp of a graphic, otherworldly image-making and though I may not know the terror of a parasite turning my body

against me until I am a creature, unruly and unkind in appearance I do know what it's like to be ostracized for my body and even betrayed by it despite my acceptance of it. I produce metaphysical focused science-fiction spun from the merging of this world and my own internalized anxieties and more existential explorations dipped in the surreal. All these thoughts are coated in a layer of self-generated mythos as they take shape into their final forms. The folklore that I weave together from my worries is built upon the projections others place on me, the shadows that I drag behind me, and rehearsals for lives I will never live for fear of consequence or true danger.

It's through my art practice that I tell stories that others may find themselves in, these stories keep me from fading into the greater noise of the world until I am unrecognizable static. By making these visions, these messages, these interactions so full of humanity the focus of my work I keep myself tethered to this world in a way that brings me joy and often heals me. To live not in desperation but in celebration of something even if its difficult, these visions propel me forward with a feverish need to produce work with that hope that I might evolve into something my creations could be proud of at some point. Perhaps there is truth in the idea that my existence, a black existence, and my future are not chained down by trauma and further on that point its possible metaphysics may have the capability to explain the relationship between trauma and survival for the African American. It is not for me to say what my work means to others, but I put myself deeply into it and I know who I am.

## *An Unnatural Burden*

I hope that introduction to *how* I live will suffice. Knowing *who* I am as an artist and *why* my work takes on the faces that it does requires more exploration into texts that have absorbed me in producing my work and going on a great deal of tangents. To know me in the context of my work is like knowing an urban legend, some details may vary from retellings but there are core pieces that hold the essence of the story and draw one in to listen. If my work and I are bound to one body, that of a cryptid, then we lurk within essays on the science of existing, in studies of the black image in film, embedded in poems and reflections on the purpose of pain, and within the media that dares to consider a future that makes space for the *other*.

Let us begin with the unnatural burden placed upon the black existence, the only existence I know personally. When contemplating the philosophical question of what is to “be” and what our pasts (both ancestral and self-owned) do to inform our present, there are a multitude of ways to define the black existence and something of dispute is whether or not we as a people abide by the proposed rules of ontology, the study of existing. Perhaps there is truth in the idea that black existence and our futures are not chained down by trauma and further on that point its possible metaphysics, a tool within ontology to help provide a framework for discussing existing, may have the capability to explain the relationship between trauma and survival for the African American. What is it that forms the self of black peoples, the soul, and can we define its material? In approaching these ideas open-minded we can explore the notion that we as a people are not monolithic while still confronting this communal space in front of a flame with dark history; looking back at our shared trauma, we must dissect what this intangible entity is and why on earth it creates a home for itself within our very fibers.

The material of my soul has only ever appeared to me in my dreams or when I've been swept up in the process of migrating those dreams into tangible forms. Excavating my innards so that this existence may move beyond survival and shift to an understanding of self, this role is something akin to an archeologist of the psyche. My nightmares have collected within my bones for decades and as I creak and ache their stories, the history beyond just my finite life, becomes the work. To know black trauma is to know the history of the world one could argue but not necessarily to know the black experience. What is trauma if not learned truths of our own experience? Not "things" that are *meant* to happen but memories that have cemented for an individual by and entangled in a play of cause and effect. What are nightmares if not past and future, reflections of what was and echoes of what could be? The material of my soul feels something like sweaty sheets, dry palms, crumpled notes, and other moments lost to fleeing from what I keep in my subconscious.

### **The Material**

What does it mean to craft tangible things with this material? First, we should consider the literal process at greater length. As someone who would define their practice and multidisciplinary, I am reluctant to create a shorthand list of materials with which I work but if I must distinguish myself by the mediums I can most closely identify as "home" then video and photography would be the areas I would associate myself with most. I work with a myriad of cameras of different ages and conditions to communicate figures and forms, often in repetition when the moving image is the end goal; I work with time and space as it pertains to the viewing of a video piece. I'm no stranger to the modern DSLR or more adept cousin the cinema-grade camera but I find the use of phone cameras lends itself to a certain accessibility and even when leaning into camcorders of a past generation the same accessibility makes itself present. Both



tools forcing upon myself the challenge of making what appears on the screen feel believable and worth seeing. To make the image feel as if it has some shred of truth beyond my word, I must decorate the frame and present the figures within it as moments in time that can lead a viewer to suspend their belief or buy in to the communal dream. I make use of spray paint, paint markers, sharpies, and stage makeup to generate markings and masks on my body as well as on costumes and the physical prints. I utilize common materials like cardboard, foams, and light weight crafting materials and go on scavenger missions into thrift stores and online second-hand shops to forge said costumes for my performances in front of the camera. I care very little for the boundaries of medium because telling these stories is what sustains me, if the process demands film photography then so be it. Animation? Then so be it. Live performance? Then so be it.

My conscious embeds itself into every item as the visions shift from medium to medium just to have the viewer believe in something that they have access to as well. My practice dips back and forward between the still and moving image, as if being frozen and unfrozen from some sort of suspended animation. I find myself starting in poems or scribbled notes and transitioning quickly into 2D with drawings and sketches of potential photographs, then these drawings may take life as audio recordings before evolving into videos before the process begins again. This goes on and on until I carve out what it is I truly want to say through a piece.

I hold storytelling as the chief focus of my practice, if I must occupy space in other mediums or engage in new techniques outside of what I've known then I will if I can tell the story I need to tell. Experimentation and blending of philosophies from different mediums breeds inspiration and innovation for me, unlocking new perspective on how I make use of the tools I've gained while trying to tell my own story. While my work explores my own identity and expanding ideology primarily, it also asks from the audience to project their own experiences on

to the characters I present and acknowledge the ways they've come to read different media and symbols. The visual tools and spatial context incorporated into a body of work is what interests me and its part of the reason I'm so drawn to the use of horror, science fiction, and surrealism in media. The art of eliciting emotions and reframing one's opinions through these confrontational and oddly beautiful but unsettling narrative vehicles is magical to me. I see my work as a product of merging my film and theater background into fine arts and using the texts I've encountered along the way to build a visual language through which to ask questions of myself and the surrounding world.

### ***Fear and The Unfiltered Self***

To document the elusive creature that is an “unfiltered thought”, or “raw emotion” requires an acceptance of the idea that much of what we let marinate in the subconscious is not monolithic, but a concentration of several things unified by whatever lens or lenses we see and understand the world through. Perhaps fear, anguish, and rage combine into an ominous and reserved presentation for someone, or happiness carries with it regret and anxiety, to say these expressions and their particular makeups are impossible is to deny that unique self and any shred of nuance to the difficult experience of being alive. To document the cryptid self, one must be open to generating work which confronts unknowns and uncomfortable feelings, looking for the opportunity to be surprised or led by the ideas which dive into the underbrush of the mind where light and rationale can become scarcities. Now with a better understanding of process let us ask the same question once more; what does it mean to craft tangible things with this material?

This soul I house is composed of many lived experiences and carries with it many influences; I take great pleasure in breaking down its components and exploring them through

my work. Fear is one of the many things that makes up the material of my soul and for the longest time I despised this sliver of myself because I mistook bravery as something independent from it like a figure under the light of my intense gaze with no shadow. To say fear is essential to understanding myself and perhaps even my “black self” or “queer self” is an understatement, but I find conversations on black fear polarizing as they can often be heavy handed, reductive because of intersectionality at play, and the tendency for them to be labeled divisive for reasons better left mumbled under breath. Its through genre that this subject can be discussed covertly by hiding in plain sight, a tactic I adopt in my own work time and time again. Films like Blade Runner or Brother from Another Planet tackle that subject of fear, survival, and otherness in a way that lends itself to conversation where all parties are present, and no one is patting themselves on the back for feeling guilt or shame rather than thinking through the psychology of hate and assumptions. For instance, in Blade Runner there is a powerful crescendo of emotion in the final scene where the fugitive cyborg Roy (Rutger Hauer) brutally crushes the fingers of persistent bounty hunter Deckard (Harrison Ford) and while Deckard reels in pain at his knees the cyborg speaks to him from what one can only assume is his heart and bares his truth out in the rain for the disgruntled man. He speaks to the politics of slavery and freedom, how cyborgs live and die at the whim of an unjust system; as he stands over a beaten and bruised Deckard, Roy says “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.” The weight of such lines permeates into the mind and Blade Runner isn’t alone in having this “psychic residue of slavery” as Film Historian Ed Guerrero puts it. In fact, he explores this idea of it “tainting the black-white social relations and transactions” at length but where his interests and mine overlap most is in a desire to see these fears and struggles with power explored not from the perspective of a dominant figure but from that of the enslaved, the fearful, and the othered.

## ***The Shadow I Cast Looks Back at Me***

My multi-media series NIGHTMARE PROPAGANDA (Fig. A, B, C) explores the functions of a nightmare and seeks to inject an opportunity to feel empowered in one's fear by means of exploring a mythos full of dark humor and existentialism. All of this to see fear not from the perspective a power play, as the slavery perspective so often pushes into motion pictures, but fear and its inner workings dissected and understood for what each piece does to produce the nightmare before one's eyes. Because fear is only what the mind perceives as danger; what is fear if not information that helps us to live another day? What is raw fear if not that which we think is ugly or wrong to us before we have a chance to see otherwise, free from the perversions of taught discrimination? The soul I house contains a fear of the shadow I cast under my own gaze, and I look at it every single day.



(Fig. A *The Fool Admires* - NIGHTMARE PROPAGANDA)

The other slivers of myself, you could call them faces perhaps, that exist in this soul are happiness, anger, and curiosity. I don't split them up purposeful to resemble barebones archetypes, but these faces do tend to morph together and bare uncanny resemblance to figures from tales beyond my years. There was perhaps a time where I thought sadness or anguish was a face, I possessed but in truth both for me, in my existence, are just one of those ever-shifting mixtures of the other slivers; sadness and anguish are a story greater than myself and beyond my years. I came to this realization several years ago after writing a poem titled *What you do with a*

*drunken sailor* where I navigated a rough bout of my depression through the lens of a metaphor pointed to the sea, a metaphor which served as a life preserver at the time I wrote the piece. I remember the absence of happiness and the exhausted but unshakeable anger at drawing a blank when it came to fixing myself, no matter how hard I tried I couldn't communicate directly how I was feeling but while hungover and contemplating my undesirable state I penned this description of one of many nights spent wandering around the streets of the small town I lived in in Missouri where the grass would wave like the ocean when I was drunk and off-balance:

*But what worse a fate than a cycle created by the mind*

*The cage that builds itself*

*The snake that eats its tail*

*Or perhaps something far more ambivalent*

*Like a tall wave before a small ship*

*Filled with no malice*

*Just following its own course*

*With complete disregard for the mission of any man*

*I stare out into the great Missouri deep*

*It's rich black littered with porch lights and the sounds of bugs living happier lives than the beasts that crush them in annoyance*

*I wish to know true silence*

*I wish to be buried in it*

Its in these works that you will find my different faces, different combinations perhaps so that the full spectrum of self may exist but nonetheless you will find me at many deconstructing my experience and attempting to create works that produce some sort of understanding. I do not enjoy people, but I like them a great deal in theory. In many cases where the idea of a person is executed well, I fall in love with the being that they show the world and I make my work for them as well. Understanding my faces, theirs, and the connections between us all on this great stage is what keeps my boat from capsizing and encourages me to explore the seas not imbued with a feeling of bravery but an acceptance of my own fear and anger and an optimism fueled by my curiosity and happiness.



*(Fig. B The Fool Contemplates - NIGHTMARE PROPAGANDA)*





*(Fig. C The Messenger Laughs - NIGHTMARE PROPAGANDA)*

## ***The Denizens of the Unconscious Mind: A Celebration of Living***

In my series NIGHTMARE PROPAGANDA, I take the manifestations of my unconscious and form their bodies, their masks, and weave their material in such a way that they may take a leap outside of the metaphysical and be separated from the audience by only the thin layer of belief that coats a television screen. These manifestations, or Denizens as I've come to call them, exist not as simple extensions of the person I am but rather of the humanity I share with others. They may reflect my life through the visions I see them in and by using my figure as a conduit or avatar for their photographic presence, but these cryptids are living ideas that could most closely be related to me as faces. The more faces beyond my own that I've been made aware of, the more I've recognized the shared unconscious for it's truth; not an indisputable truth but one through which the waking life and the hours spent among our dreams and nightmares can be made clearer. My practice continuously tackles the politics of self, the narratives chained to my flesh, the horror in my blood, and the suffocation I avoid by creating air to breathe in this vast vacuum of space that is being a person at a very difficult time to be alive (though it stands to reason that all times might be a hard time to be alive within the black existence); All these pressures move me to create mythos and seek community through the creation of art. As I said previously, I make art because I must and if to be alive, I must spend each day learning new storytelling tools and spells that keep the curtain from being pulled back then I will because I don't wish to stop being the wizard. This practice has given me access to faces like grief and contentment, given me the right to agency in a body that often feels possessed by the eyes of strangers, and sent me running full speed toward a future where I do not fear that I will run out of things to say but rather I will have enough time to explore all the vast beyond that lies within my material. Even if in reality I can't help anyone directly with this work, the chance that it gives

them hope too and the drive to be strong for something is the true magic. I most certainly align myself with Richard Pryor's depiction of the Wizard from the 1978 Motown classic *The Wiz* because my magic keeps the slivers of myself from falling apart and floating out into nothingness, it allows for me to stand for something even if I'm lost with no way home.

To see the creatures from my work, form humanity and further develop their own material, their own souls, is terrifying and beautiful. To see other people, place trust in me and share their voices, their wants, their regrets, their sorrow, and their innocence through my art is horrifying and heartwarming. To generate this collective understanding and move towards acceptance of "the other" not only as it takes shape in flesh but in the mind is the style of a magnificent terror that I've always wanted to merge with excites me and it's where my work feels destined to go. My existence as this cryptid of fear and constant creation is ultimately a happy one because I relish in knowing that I am the silence of space after a parasite boards a previously safe vessel, the John Carpenter inspired abomination that escapes from it's cage, and the Lovecraftian horror that looks at you with it's impossible number of eyes and sees who you are when you're alone. I am all these things because nightmares carry no true malice. When life can confuse or numb you at least a nightmare can laugh with you about it, hold you, and make you feel something even if its jarring; it's a lot sweeter when you consider them from that perspective.

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