

Ayana Jackson Gallery MOMO Johannesburg

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Ayana Jackson's exhibition <|Projection Surface|> presents a number of recurring stereotypes and representations of black bodies and black/African sexuality that range from the grotesque, the crudely sexual, uncivilised, boundless and, finally, sacred. Jackson explores some of these projections and attempts to unsettle them through a series of re-enactments of familiar tropes associated with black/African bodies and what the artist refers to as the global south.

One such re-enactment, <|Povporn: Death|>, presents an idyllic pastoral scene against which hangs a serene and lithesome female body. She appears to be in repose, her bronzed, naked form and face turned slightly away from the camera, as if caught mid turn. Her right breast and dark brown aureole face outwards towards the camera while her left breast and nipple turn inwards, forming an elegant silhouette against the bucolic backdrop. The noose around her neck is partially obscured by her coiffed hair. It could be a snare or a hangman's knot. There are no signs of struggle here. She could be sleeping, or dreaming, except of course that the image is reminiscent of the lynchings in the American South. She is an exquisite corpse.

The "Povporn" series invokes the sensationalist images of black death that saturate contemporary popular media. Many post-colonial Africanist scholars have analysed how African bodies and experiences have been discursively invented as "signs of something else" and, specifically, how colonialism and imperialism, beginning in the eighteenth century, linked projections about black bodies to myth-making about the perceived racial degeneracy of others. Colonial perceptions are thus constructed through projections of African bodies.

Strangely, Jackson's images are not grotesque.

While trying to unpack my own discomfort at "Povporn", I realised that while all these images were re-enactments of the subjectification of black bodies, these bodies were also denied interiority. Jackson's silhouettes signal an erotics of such suffering, which Jackson self-consciously invokes with her own nakedness. One walks away from these re-enactments with the all too familiar feeling that the Black Body is always already a catastrophe and is repeatedly made to entice ruination.¹ These images also suggest a close connection between sexual fantasy, ruination and subjectification. As Ann McClintock argues in her book, *Imperial Leather: Race Gender and Sexuality* (1995), that eroticism and sexuality are inscribed in narratives of colonial mastery for the coloniser, in the ways in which he oriented himself in space, as an agent of power and of knowledge. In other words, racially marked female bodies easily became, and are still, sites for others' inscription.

On the same exhibition, in a series entitled "Black Madonna Tabloid", Jackson attempts to unsettle racist discourses that underpin sensationalist reportage of (white) celebrity adoptions of African children, by

substituting the imagined white celebrity couple and their black child with a young black couple and their white child. While I don't find these images particularly unsettling, one might speculate that they provide for the possibility of a post-race love, and a recuperated black male figure as loving father, and thus interiority and agency. However, it simultaneously reminds us that the black, especially the black woman, is sometimes denied interiority and agency with regards to raising her own children.²

On the other hand, the absence of any reference to the geo-politics of black death in this half of the show makes it difficult at first to understand the connections the "necro-ontology" (to quote Achille Mbembe) of the "Povporn" series and the phenomenon of celebrity adoption. But further reflection makes the connection between the two parts of the exhibition clearer. Celebrity adoptions of black and brown third world children by white icons of American popular culture posits such celebrities as harbingers of an enlightenment project that robs African women of their agency, since it denies any recognition of the global and national relations of hierarchy that are the conditions of possibility for these transracial adoptions. This flattening of the power relation embodied in sensationalist media representations of African bodies is not only reproduced in Jackson's work, but also somewhat banalised. In other words, what Jackson calls into question is never really undone in her work. Instead, we are left only with banal images of bourgeois subjectivity as the possibility for freedom.

The most provocative image on the exhibition was the installation <| Maria de Latte |> occupying one room. Here Jackson employs both African and Catholic iconography to mobilise the idea that the mother of Christ was African/black. The role of caregiver and surrogate mother often assigned to black women is elevated to the level of the sacred and Jackson reminds us that the African woman was not always represented as abject. Here, she is the virgin-saint as the condition of possibility for Christian salvation. African/black women continue to provide this "salvation" since white life and also African male life are now organised mainly through the abjection of African womanhood and its attendant representations: mammy, whore, jezebel, welfare queen, etc.

What are we to make of these contradictory representations of the same body? Perhaps, through a recognition of the black body as a site of catastrophe the ordinary may become extraordinary once more. Jackson's exhibition disturbed me. I am not sure if it did so in the way that she hoped it might disturb. And these are the questions I am left with: what is the project here? Is there only kind of black experience? Does this work enable us to imagine new possibilities for black personhood or does it restrict our imagination by reworking a terrain of black subjectification so well mined, that her images serve only to banalise rather than unsettle? I want to like the project and I want it to work, but I am still struggling to do the former and unclear about what work it is actually meant to do. That said, my response here to the exhibition affirms that it demands engagement.

1. C. Uzundu, "Power with TEETH: Neoliberalism as Ruination and Containment of the Black Catastrophe",

<http://jhbwtc.blogspot.com/2011/07/power-with-teeth-neoliberalism-as.html>.

2. Many thanks to C. Uzundu for his critical insights on subjectification and the geopolitics of blackness.